

BOOKS BY *Vladimir Nabokov*

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Mary
King, Queen, Knave
The Defense
The Eye
Glory
Laughter in the Dark
Despair
Invitation to a Beheading
The Gift
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight
Bend Sinister
Lolita
Pnin
Pale Fire
Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle
Transparent Things
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Lolita: A Screenplay
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Lermontov, and Tiutchev*

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The Song of Igor's Campaign (Anon.)

Eugene Onegin (Alexander Pushkin)

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*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: Correspondence between
Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1971*

Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-1977

MISCELLANEOUS

Poems and Problems

The Annotated Lolita

STRONG OPINIONS

Vladimir Nabokov
STRONG OPINIONS

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to Véra

CONTENTS

Foreword	xv
Interviews	1
Letters to Editors	209
Articles	221

FOREWORD

I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child. Throughout my academic ascent in America, from lean lecturer to Full Professor, I have never delivered to my audience one scrap of information not prepared in typescript beforehand and not held under my eyes on the bright-lit lectern. My hemmings and hawings over the telephone cause long-distance callers to switch from their native English to pathetic French. At parties, if I attempt to entertain people with a good story, I have to go back to every other sentence for oral erasures and inserts. Even the dream I describe to my wife across the breakfast table is only a first draft.

In these circumstances nobody should ask me to submit to an interview if by “interview” a chat between two normal human beings is implied. It has been tried at least twice in the old days, and once a recording machine was present, and when the tape was rerun and I had finished laughing, I knew that never in my life would I repeat that sort of performance. Nowadays I take every precaution to ensure a dignified beat of the mandarin’s fan. The interviewer’s questions have to be sent to me in writing, answered by me in writing, and reproduced verbatim. Such are the three absolute conditions.

But the interviewer wishes to visit me. He wishes to see my pencil poised above the page, my painted lampshade, my bookshelves, my old white borzoi asleep at my feet. He

feels he needs the background music of bogus informality, and as many colorful details as can be memorized, if not actually jotted down (“N. gulped down his vodka and quipped with a grin—”). Have I the heart to cancel the cosiness? I have.

A certain excellent lotion for thinning hair is by nature of an unattractive, emulsive tint. Its makers try to correct this by adding some green color—green being meant to suggest, by cosmetological tradition, the freshness of spring, pine-woods, jade, tree frogs, and so forth. The bottle, however, has to be vigorously shaken in order to have its contents viridate; otherwise, in repose, all that shows is an inchwide green border topping the unchanged, genuine, opalescent pillar of liquid. *Not* shaking the bottle before use is with me a matter of principle.

Similarly, in dealing with the results of interviews as they appear on the printed page, I ignore the floating decor and keep only the basic substance. My files contain the results of some forty interviews in several languages. Only some of the American and British ones have been included here. A few of those have had to be skipped because, by a kind of awful alchemy, and not merely by a good shake, my authentic response got so hopelessly mixed with the artificial color of human interest, added by the manufacturer, as to defy separation. In other cases I have had no trouble in leaving out the well-meant little touches (as well as the gaudiest journalistic inventions), thus gradually eliminating every element of spontaneity, all semblance of actual talk. The thing is transmuted finally into a more or less neatly paragraphed essay, and that is the ideal form a written interview should take.

My fiction allows me so seldom the occasion to air my private views that I rather welcome, now and then, the questions put to me in sudden spates by charming, courteous, intelligent visitors. In this volume, the question-and-answer section is followed by a few Letters to Editors, which are “self-explanatory,” as lawyers put it in their

precise way. Finally, there is a batch of essays, all but one of which were written in America or Switzerland.

Swinburne has a shrewd comment on “the rancorous and reptile crew of poeticules who decompose into criticasters.” This curious phenomenon was typical of the situation in the small literary world of the Russian emigration in Paris around 1930 when the aesthetics of Bunin, Hodasevich and one or two other outstanding authors underwent particularly nasty attacks from variously “committed” criticules. In those years I methodically derided the detractors of art and enjoyed tremendously the exasperation my writings caused in that clique; but translating today my numerous old essays from my difficult Russian into pedantic English and explaining nice points of former dislocation and strategy is a task of little interest either to me or the reader. The only exception I have allowed myself is the piece on Hodasevich.

In result, the present body of my occasional English prose, shorn of its long Russian shadow, seems to reflect an altogether more agreeable person than the “V. Sirin,” evoked with mixed feelings by émigré memoirists, politicians, poets, and mystics, who still remember our skirmishes of the nineteen-thirties in Paris. A milder, easier temper permeates today the expression of my opinions, however strong; and this is as it should be.

Vladimir Nabokov
Montreux, 1973

STRONG OPINIONS

INTERVIEWS

- 1 Anonymous (1962)
- 2 BBC Television (1962)
- 3 *Playboy* (1964)
- 4 *Life* (1964)
- 5 TV-13 NY (1965)
- 6 *Wisconsin Studies* (1967)
- 7 *The Paris Review* (1967)
- 8 *The New York Times Book Review* (1968)
- 9 BBC-2 (1968)
- 10 *Time* (1969)
- 11 *The New York Times* (1969)
- 12 *The Sunday Times* (1969)
- 13 BBC-2 (1969)
- 14 *Vogue* (1969)
- 15 *Novel* (1970)
- 16 *The New York Times* (1971)
- 17 *The New York Times Book Review* (1972)
- 18 *Swiss Broadcast* (1972?)
- 19 *Bayerischer Rundfunk* (1971-72)
- 20 Anonymous
- 21 *Vogue* (1972)
- 22 Anonymous (1972)

1

On the morning of June 5, 1962, the *Queen Elizabeth* brought my wife and me from Cherbourg to New York for the film première of *Lolita*. On the day of our arrival three or four journalists interviewed me at the St. Regis hotel. I have a little cluster of names jotted down in my pocket diary but am not sure which, if any, refers to that group. The questions and answers were typed from my notes immediately after the interview.

Interviewers do not find you a particularly stimulating person. Why is that so?

I pride myself on being a person with no public appeal. I have never been drunk in my life. I never use schoolboy words of four letters. I have never worked in an office or in a coal mine. I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever. Nothing bores me more than political novels and the literature of social intent.

Still there must be things that move you—likes and dislikes.

My loathings are simple: stupidity, oppression, crime, cruelty, soft music. My pleasures are the most intense known to man: writing and butterfly hunting.

You write everything in longhand, don't you?

Yes. I cannot type.

Would you agree to show us a sample of your rough drafts?

I'm afraid I must refuse. Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It is like passing around samples of one's sputum.

Do you read many new novels? Why do you laugh?

I laugh because well-meaning publishers keep sending me—with “hope-you-will-like-it-as-much-as-we-do” letters—only one kind of fiction: novels truffled with obscenities, fancy words, and would-be weird incidents. They seem to be all by one and the same writer—who is not even the shadow of my shadow.

What is your opinion of the so-called “anti-novel” in France?

I am not interested in groups, movements, schools of writing and so forth. I am interested only in the individual artist. This “anti-novel” does not really exist; but there does exist one great French writer, Robbe-Grillet; his work is grotesquely imitated by a number of banal scribblers whom a phony label assists commercially.

I notice you “haw” and “er” a great deal. Is it a sign of approaching senility?

Not at all. I have always been a wretched speaker. My vocabulary dwells deep in my mind and needs paper to wriggle out into the physical zone. Spontaneous eloquence seems to me a miracle. I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.

What about TV appearances?

Well (you always begin with “well” on TV), after one

such appearance in London a couple of years ago I was accused by a naive critic of squirming and avoiding the camera. The interview, of course, had been carefully rehearsed. I had carefully written out all my answers (and most of the questions), and because I am such a helpless speaker, I had my notes (mis-laid since) on index cards arranged before me—ambushed behind various innocent props; hence I could neither stare at the camera nor leer at the questioner.

Yet you have lectured extensively——

In 1940, before launching on my academic career in America, I fortunately took the trouble of writing one hundred lectures—about 2,000 pages—on Russian literature, and later another hundred lectures on great novelists from Jane Austen to James Joyce. This kept me happy at Wellesley and Cornell for twenty academic years. Although, at the lectern, I evolved a subtle up and down movement of my eyes, there was never any doubt in the minds of alert students that I was reading, not speaking.

When did you start writing in English?

I was bilingual as a baby (Russian and English) and added French at five years of age. In my early boyhood all the notes I made on the butterflies I collected were in English, with various terms borrowed from that most delightful magazine *The Entomologist*. It published my first paper (on Crimean butterflies) in 1920. The same year I contributed a poem in English to the Trinity Magazine, Cambridge, while I was a student there (1919–1922). After that in Berlin and in Paris I wrote my Russian books—poems, stories, eight novels. They were read by a reasonable percentage of the three million Russian émigrés, and were of course absolutely banned and ignored in Soviet Russia. In the middle thirties I translated for publication in English two of my Russian novels, *Despair* and *Camera*

Obscura (retitled *Laughter in the Dark* in America). The first novel that I wrote directly in English was *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in 1939 in Paris. After moving to America in 1940, I contributed poems and stories to *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker* and wrote four novels, *Bend Sinister* (1947), *Lolita* (1955), *Pnin* (1957) and *Pale Fire* (1962). I have also published an autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1951), and several scientific papers on the taxonomy of butterflies.

Would you like to talk about Lolita?

Well, no. I said everything I wanted to say about the book in the Afterword appended to its American and British editions.

Did you find it hard to write the script of Lolita?

The hardest part was taking the plunge—deciding to undertake the task. In 1959 I was invited to Hollywood by Harris and Kubrick, but after several consultations with them I decided I did not want to do it. A year later, in Lugano, I received a telegram from them urging me to reconsider my decision. In the meantime a kind of script had somehow taken shape in my imagination so that actually I was glad they had repeated their offer. I traveled once more to Hollywood and there, under the jacarandas, worked for six months on the thing. Turning one's novel into a movie script is rather like making a series of sketches for a painting that has long ago been finished and framed. I composed new scenes and speeches in an effort to safeguard a *Lolita* acceptable to me. I knew that if I did not write the script somebody else would, and I also knew that at best the end product in such cases is less of a blend than a collision of interpretations. I have not yet seen the picture. It may turn out to be a lovely morning mist as perceived through mosquito netting, or it may turn out to be the swerves of a scenic drive as felt by the horizontal passenger of an

ambulance. From my seven or eight sessions with Kubrick during the writing of the script I derived the impression that he was an artist, and it is on this impression that I base my hopes of seeing a plausible *Lolita* on June 13th in New York.

What are you working at now?

I am reading the proofs of my translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, a novel in verse which, with a huge commentary, will be brought out by the Bollingen Foundation in four handsome volumes of more than five hundred pages each.

Could you describe this work?

During my years of teaching literature at Cornell and elsewhere I demanded of my students the passion of science and the patience of poetry. As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.

And so you preserved the fruit?

Yes. My tastes and disgusts have influenced my ten-year-long work on *Eugene Onegin*. In translating its 5500 lines into English I had to decide between rhyme and reason—and I chose reason. My only ambition has been to provide a crib, a pony, an absolutely literal translation of the thing, with copious and pedantic notes whose bulk far exceeds the text of the poem. Only a paraphrase “reads well”; my translation does not; it is honest and clumsy, ponderous and slavishly faithful. I have several notes to every stanza (of which there are more than 400, counting the variants). This commentary contains a discussion of the original melody and a complete explication of the text.

Do you like being interviewed?

Well, the luxury of speaking on one theme—oneself—is a sensation not to be despised. But the result is sometimes puzzling. Recently the Paris paper *Candide* had me spout wild nonsense in an idiotic setting. But I have also often met with considerable fair play. Thus *Esquire* printed all my corrections to the account of an interview that I found full of errors. Gossip writers are harder to keep track of, and they are apt to be very careless. Leonard Lyons made me explain why I let my wife handle motion picture transactions by the absurd and tasteless remark: “Anyone who can handle a butcher can handle a producer.”

2

In mid-July, 1962, Peter Duval-Smith and Christopher Burstall came for a BBC television interview to Zermatt where I happened to be collecting that summer. The lepidoptera lived up to the occasion, so did the weather. My visitors and their crew had never paid much attention to those insects and I was touched and flattered by the childish wonderment with which they viewed the crowds of butterflies imbibing moisture on brookside mud at various spots of the mountain trail. Pictures were taken of the swarms that arose at my passage, and other hours of the day were devoted to the reproduction of the interview proper. It eventually appeared on the *Bookstand* program and was published in *The Listener* (November 22, 1962). I have mislaid the cards on which I had written my answers. I suspect that the published text was taken straight from the tape for it teems with inaccuracies. These I have tried to weed out ten years later but was forced to strike out a few sentences here and there when memory refused to restore the sense flawed by defective or improperly mended speech.

The poem I quote (with metrical accents added) will be found translated into English in Chapter Two of *The Gift*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1963.

Would you ever go back to Russia?

I will never go back, for the simple reason that all the

Russia I need is always with me: literature, language, and my own Russian childhood. I will never return. I will never surrender. And anyway, the grotesque shadow of a police state will not be dispelled in my lifetime. I don't think they know my works there—oh, perhaps a number of readers exist there in my special secret service, but let us not forget that Russia has grown tremendously provincial during these forty years, apart from the fact that people there are told what to read, what to think. In America I'm happier than in any other country. It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America. It is a second home in the true sense of the word.

You're a professional lepidopterist?

Yes, I'm interested in the classification, variation, evolution, structure, distribution, habits, of lepidoptera: this sounds very grand, but actually I'm an expert in only a very small group of butterflies. I have contributed several works on butterflies to the various scientific journals—but I want to repeat that my interest in butterflies is exclusively scientific.

Is there any connection with your writing?

There is in a general way, because I think that in a work of art there is a kind of merging between the two things, between the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science.

In your new novel, Pale Fire, one of the characters says that reality is neither the subject nor the object of real art, which creates its own reality. What is that reality?

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of

natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects—that machine, there, for instance. It's a complete ghost to me—I don't understand a thing about it and, well, it's a mystery to me, as much of a mystery as it would be to Lord Byron.

You say that reality is an intensely subjective matter, but in your books it seems to me that you seem to take an almost perverse delight in literary deception.

The fake move in a chess problem, the illusion of a solution or the conjuror's magic: I used to be a little conjuror when I was a boy. I loved doing simple tricks—turning water into wine, that kind of thing; but I think I'm in good company because all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation. Do you know how poetry started? I always think that it started when a cave boy came running back to the cave, through the tall grass, shouting as he ran, "Wolf, wolf," and there was no wolf. His baboon-like parents, great sticklers for the truth, gave him a hiding, no doubt, but poetry had been born—the tall story had been born in the tall grass.

You talk about games of deception, like chess and conjuring. Are you, in fact, fond of them yourself?

I am fond of chess but deception in chess, as in art, is only part of the game; it's part of the combination, part of

the delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought, which can be false vistas, perhaps. I think a good combination should always contain a certain element of deception.

You spoke about conjuring in Russia, as a child, and one remembers that some of the most intense passages in a number of your books are concerned with the memories of your lost childhood. What is the importance of memory to you?

Memory is, really, in itself, a tool, one of the many tools that an artist uses; and some recollections, perhaps intellectual rather than emotional, are very brittle and sometimes apt to lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed by the novelist in his book, when they are given away to characters.

Do you mean that you lose the sense of a memory once you have written it down?

Sometimes, but that only refers to a certain type of intellectual memory. But, for instance—oh, I don't know, the freshness of the flowers being arranged by the undergardener in the cool drawing-room of our country house, as I was running downstairs with my butterfly net on a summer day half a century ago: that kind of thing is absolutely permanent, immortal, it can never change, no matter how many times I farm it out to my characters, it is always there with me; there's the red sand, the white garden bench, the black fir trees, everything, a permanent possession. I think it is all a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is. I think it's natural that I have a more passionate affection for my old memories, the memories of my childhood, than I have for later ones, so that Cambridge in England or Cambridge in New England is less vivid in my mind and in my self than some kind of nook in the park on our country estate in Russia.

Do you think that such an intense power of memory as yours has inhibited your desire to invent in your books?

No, I don't think so.

The same sort of incident turns up again and again, sometimes in slightly different forms.

That depends on my characters.

Do you still feel Russian, in spite of so many years in America?

I do feel Russian and I think that my Russian works, the various novels and poems and short stories that I have written during these years, are a kind of tribute to Russia. And I might define them as the waves and ripples of the shock caused by the disappearance of the Russia of my childhood. And recently I have paid tribute to her in an English work on Pushkin.

Why are you so passionately concerned with Pushkin?

It started with a translation, a literal translation. I thought it was very difficult and the more difficult it was, the more exciting it seemed. So it's not so much caring about Pushkin—I love him dearly of course, he is the greatest Russian poet, there is no doubt about that—but it was again the combination of the excitement of finding the right way of doing things and a certain approach to reality, to the reality of Pushkin, through my own translations. As a matter of fact I am very much concerned with things Russian and I have just finished revising a good translation of my novel, *The Gift*, which I wrote about thirty years ago. It is the longest, I think the best, and the most nostalgic of my Russian novels. It portrays the adventures, literary and romantic, of a young Russian expatriate in Berlin, in the twenties; but he's not myself. I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to

contain some biographical touches. And there is another thing about it that pleases me: probably my favorite Russian poem is one that I happened to give to my main character in that novel.

Written by yourself?

Which I wrote myself, of course; and now I'm wondering whether I might be able to recite it in Russian. Let me explain it: there are two persons involved, a boy and a girl, standing on a bridge above the reflected sunset, and there are swallows skimming by, and the boy turns to the girl and says to her, "Tell me, will you always remember *that* swallow?—not any kind of swallow, not those swallows, there, but that particular swallow that skimmed by?" And she says, "Of course I will," and they both burst into tears.

Odnázhdý my pód-vecher óba
Stoyáli na stárom mostú.
Skazhí mne, sprosíl ya, do gróba
Zapómnish' von lástochku tú?
I tý otvechála: eshchyó by!

I kák my zaplákali óba,
Kak vskríknula zhízn' na letú!
Do závtra, navéki, do gróba,
Odnázhdý na stárom mostú . . .

What language do you think in?

I don't think in any language. I think in images. I don't believe that people think in languages. They don't move their lips when they think. It is only a certain type of illiterate person who moves his lips as he reads or ruminates. No, I think in images, and now and then a Russian phrase or an English phrase will form with the foam of the brainwave, but that's about all.

You started writing in Russian and then you switched to English, didn't you?

Yes, that was a very difficult kind of switch. My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English.

You have written a shelf of books in English as well as your books in Russian. And of them only Lolita is well known. Does it annoy you to be the Lolita man?

No, I wouldn't say that, because *Lolita* is a special favorite of mine. It was my most difficult book—the book that treated of a theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my combinational talent to make it real.

Were you surprised at the wild success when it came?

I was surprised that the book was published at all.

Did you, in fact, have any doubts about whether Lolita ought to be printed, considering its subject matter?

No; after all, when you write a book you generally envisage its publication, in some far future. But I was pleased that the book was published.

What was the genesis of Lolita?

She was born a long time ago, it must have been in 1939, in Paris; the first little throb of *Lolita* went through me in Paris in '39, or perhaps early in '40, at a time when I was laid up with a fierce attack of intercostal neuralgia which is a very painful complaint—rather like the fabulous stitch in Adam's side. As far as I can recall the first shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted in a rather mysterious way by a newspaper story, I think it was in *Paris Soir*,

about an ape in the Paris Zoo, who after months of coaxing by scientists produced finally the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal, and this sketch, reproduced in the paper, showed the bars of the poor creature's cage.

Did Humbert Humbert, the middle-aged seducer, have any original?

No. He's a man I devised, a man with an obsession, and I think many of my characters have sudden obsessions, different kinds of obsessions; but he never existed. He did exist after I had written the book. While I was writing the book, here and there in a newspaper I would read all sorts of accounts about elderly gentlemen who pursued little girls: a kind of interesting coincidence but that's about all.

Did Lolita herself have an original?

No, Lolita didn't have any original. She was born in my own mind. She never existed. As a matter of fact, I don't know little girls very well. When I consider this subject, I don't think I know a single little girl. I've met them socially now and then, but Lolita is a figment of my imagination.

Why did you write Lolita?

It was an interesting thing to do. Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of the pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions.

How do you write? What are your methods?

I find now that index cards are really the best kind of paper that I can use for the purpose. I don't write consecutively from the beginning to the next chapter and so on to the end. I just fill in the gaps of the picture, of this jigsaw puzzle which is quite clear in my mind, picking out a piece

here and a piece there and filling out part of the sky and part of the landscape and part of the—I don't know, the carousing hunters.

Another aspect of your not entirely usual consciousness is the extraordinary importance you attach to color.

Color. I think I was born a painter—really!—and up to my fourteenth year, perhaps, I used to spend most of the day drawing and painting and I was supposed to become a painter in due time. But I don't think I had any real talent there. However, the sense of color, the love of color, I've had all my life: and also I have this rather freakish gift of seeing letters in color. It's called color hearing. Perhaps one in a thousand has that. But I'm told by psychologists that most children have it, that later they lose that aptitude when they are told by stupid parents that it's all nonsense, an A isn't black, a B isn't brown—now don't be absurd.

What colors are your own initials, VN?

V is a kind of pale, transparent pink: I think it's called, technically, quartz pink: this is one of the closest colors that I can connect with the V. And the N, on the other hand, is a greyish-yellowish oatmeal color. But a funny thing happens: my wife has this gift of seeing letters in color, too, but her colors are completely different. There are, perhaps, two or three letters where we coincide, but otherwise the colors are quite different. It turned out, we discovered one day, that my son, who was a little boy at the time—I think he was ten or eleven—sees letters in colors, too. Quite naturally he would say, "Oh, this isn't that color, this is this color," and so on. Then we asked him to list his colors and we discovered that in one case, one letter which he sees as purple, or perhaps mauve, is pink to me and blue to my wife. This is the letter M. So the combination of pink and blue makes lilac in his case. Which is as if genes were painting in aquarelle.

Whom do you write for? What audience?

I don't think that an artist should bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning. I think that the audience an artist imagines, when he imagines that kind of a thing, is a room filled with people wearing his own mask.

In your books there is an almost extravagant concern with masks and disguises: almost as if you were trying to hide yourself behind something, as if you'd lost yourself.

Oh, no. I think I'm always there; there's no difficulty about that. Of course there is a certain type of critic who when reviewing a work of fiction keeps dotting all the i's with the author's head. Recently one anonymous clown, writing on *Pale Fire* in a New York book review, mistook all the declarations of my invented commentator in the book for my own. It is also true that some of my more responsible characters are given some of my own ideas. There is John Shade in *Pale Fire*, the poet. He does borrow some of my own opinions. There is one passage in his poem, which is part of the book, where he says something I think I can endorse. He says—let me quote it, if I can remember; yes, I think I can do it: "I loathe such things as jazz, the white-hosed moron torturing a black bull, rayed with red, abstractist bric-a-brac, primitivist folk masks, progressive schools, music in supermarkets, swimming pools, brutes, bores, class-conscious philistines, Freud, Marx, fake thinkers, puffed-up poets, frauds and sharks." That's how it goes.

It is obvious that neither John Shade nor his creator are very clubbable men.

I don't belong to any club or group. I don't fish, cook, dance, endorse books, sign books, co-sign declarations, eat oysters, get drunk, go to church, go to analysts, or take part in demonstrations.

It sometimes seems to me that in your novels—in Laughter in the Dark for instance—there is a strain of perversity amounting to cruelty.

I don't know. Maybe. Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don't care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade—demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out. Actually, I'm a mild old gentleman who loathes cruelty.

3

This exchange with Alvin Toffler appeared in *Playboy* for January, 1964. Great trouble was taken on both sides to achieve the illusion of a spontaneous conversation. Actually, my contribution as printed conforms meticulously to the answers, every word of which I had written in long-hand before having them typed for submission to Toffler when he came to Montreux in mid-March, 1963. The present text takes into account the order of my interviewer's questions as well as the fact that a couple of consecutive pages of my typescript were apparently lost in transit. *Egreto perambis doribus!*

With the American publication of Lolita in 1958, your fame and fortune mushroomed almost overnight from high repute among the literary cognoscenti—which you had enjoyed for more than 30 years—to both acclaim and abuse as the world-renowned author of a sensational best seller. In the aftermath of this cause célèbre, do you ever regret having written Lolita?

On the contrary, I shudder retrospectively when I recall that there was a moment, in 1950, and again in 1951, when I was on the point of burning Humbert Humbert's little black diary. No, I shall never regret *Lolita*. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle—its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look. Of course she

completely eclipsed my other works—at least those I wrote in English: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, my short stories, my book of recollections; but I cannot grudge her this. There is a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet.

Though many readers and reviewers would disagree that her charm is tender, few would deny that it is queer—so much so that when director Stanley Kubrick proposed his plan to make a movie of Lolita, you were quoted as saying, “Of course they’ll have to change the plot. Perhaps they will make Lolita a dwarfess. Or they will make her 16 and Humbert 26.” Though you finally wrote the screenplay yourself, several reviewers took the film to task for watering down the central relationship. Were you satisfied with the final product?

I thought the movie was absolutely first-rate. The four main actors deserve the very highest praise. Sue Lyon bringing that breakfast tray or childishly pulling on her sweater in the car—these are moments of unforgettable acting and directing. The killing of Quilty is a masterpiece, and so is the death of Mrs. Haze. I must point out, though, that I had nothing to do with the actual production. If I had, I might have insisted on stressing certain things that were not stressed—for example, the different motels at which they stayed. All I did was write the screenplay, a preponderating portion of which was used by Kubrick. The “watering down,” if any, did not come from my aspergillum.

Do you feel that Lolita’s twofold success has affected your life for the better or for the worse?

I gave up teaching—that’s about all in the way of change. Mind you, I loved teaching, I loved Cornell, I loved composing and delivering my lectures on Russian writers and European great books. But around 60, and especially in winter, one begins to find hard the physical process of

teaching, the getting up at a fixed hour every other morning, the struggle with the snow in the driveway, the march through long corridors to the classroom, the effort of drawing on the blackboard a map of James Joyce's Dublin or the arrangement of the semi-sleeping car of the St. Petersburg–Moscow express in the early 1870s—without an understanding of which neither *Ulysses* nor *Anna Karenin*, respectively, makes sense. For some reason my most vivid memories concern examinations. Big amphitheater in Goldwin Smith. Exam from 8 A.M. to 10:30. About 150 students—unwashed, unshaven young males and reasonably well-groomed young females. A general sense of tedium and disaster. Half-past eight. Little coughs, the clearing of nervous throats, coming in clusters of sound, rustling of pages. Some of the martyrs plunged in meditation, their arms locked behind their heads. I meet a dull gaze directed at me, seeing in me with hope and hate the source of forbidden knowledge. Girl in glasses comes up to my desk to ask: "Professor Kafka, do you want us to say that . . . ? Or do you want us to answer only the first part of the question?" The great fraternity of C-minus, backbone of the nation, steadily scribbling on. A rustle arising simultaneously, the majority turning a page in their bluebooks, good teamwork. The shaking of a cramped wrist, the failing ink, the deodorant that breaks down. When I catch eyes directed at me, they are forthwith raised to the ceiling in pious meditation. Windowpanes getting misty. Boys peeling off sweaters. Girls chewing gum in rapid cadence. Ten minutes, five, three, time's up.

Citing in Lolita the same kind of acid-etched scene you've just described, many critics have called the book a masterful satiric social commentary on America. Are they right?

Well, I can only repeat that I have neither the intent nor the temperament of a moral or social satirist. Whether or not critics think that in *Lolita* I am ridiculing human folly

leaves me supremely indifferent. But I am annoyed when the glad news is spread that I am ridiculing America.

But haven't you written yourself that there is "nothing more exhilarating than American Philistine vulgarity"?

No, I did not say that. That phrase has been lifted out of context, and, like a round, deep-sea fish, has burst in the process. If you look up my little after-piece, "On a Book Entitled Lolita," which I appended to the novel, you will see that what I really said was that in regard to Philistine vulgarity—which I do feel is most exhilarating—no difference exists between American and European manners. I go on to say that a proletarian from Chicago can be just as Philistine as an English duke.

Many readers have concluded that the Philistinism you seem to find the most exhilarating is that of America's sexual mores.

Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude—all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.

Have you ever been psychoanalyzed?

Have I been *what*?

Subjected to psychoanalytical examination.

Why, good God?

In order to see how it is done. Some critics have felt that your barbed comments about the fashionability of Freudianism, as practiced by American analysts, suggest a contempt based upon familiarity.

Bookish familiarity only. The ordeal itself is much too silly and disgusting to be contemplated even as a joke. Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest

deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick.

Speaking of the very sick, you suggested in Lolita that Humbert Humbert's appetite for nymphets is the result of an unrequited childhood love affair; in Invitation to a Beheading you wrote about a 12-year-old girl, Emmie, who is erotically interested in a man twice her age; and in Bend Sinister your protagonist dreams that he is "surreptitiously enjoying Mariette (his maid) while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter." Some critics, in poring over your works for clues to your personality, have pointed to this recurrent theme as evidence of an unwholesome preoccupation on your part with the subject of sexual attraction between pubescent girls and middle-aged men. Do you feel that there may be some truth in this charge?

I think it would be more correct to say that had I not written *Lolita*, readers would not have started finding nymphets in my other works and in their own households. I find it very amusing when a friendly, polite person says to me—probably just in order to be friendly and polite—"Mr. Nabórkov," or "Mr. Nabáhkov," or "Mr. Nabkov" or "Mr. Nabóhkov," depending on his linguistic abilities, "I have a little daughter who is a regular Lolita." People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writings. And then, of course, there is that special type of critic, the ferrety, human-interest fiend, the jolly vulgarian. Someone, for instance, discovered telltale affinities between Humbert's boyhood romance on the Riviera and my own recollections about little Colette, with whom I built damp sand castles in Biarritz when I was ten. Somber Humbert was, of course, thirteen and in the throes of a pretty extravagant sexual excitement, whereas my own romance with Colette had no trace of erotic desire and indeed was perfectly common-

place and normal. And, of course, at nine and ten years of age, in that set, in those times, we knew nothing whatsoever about the false facts of life that are imparted nowadays to infants by progressive parents.

Why false?

Because the imagination of a small child—especially a town child—at once distorts, stylizes, or otherwise alters the bizarre things he is told about the busy bee, which neither he nor his parents can distinguish from a bumblebee, anyway.

What one critic has termed your “almost obsessive attention to the phrasing, rhythm, cadence and connotation of words” is evident even in the selection of names for your own celebrated bee and bumblebee—Lolita and Humbert Humbert. How did they occur to you?

For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is “L”. The suffix “-ita” has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: Lolita. However, it should not be pronounced as you and most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy, clammy “L” and a long “o”. No, the first syllable should be as in “lollipop”, the “L” liquid and delicate, the “lee” not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary note of archness and caress. Another consideration was the welcome murmur of its source name, the fountain name: those roses and tears in “Dolores.” My little girl’s heartrending fate had to be taken into account together with the cuteness and limpidity. Dolores also provided her with another, plainer, more familiar and infantile diminutive: Dolly, which went nicely with the surname “Haze,” where Irish mists blend with a German bunny—I mean, a small German hare.

You're making a word-playful reference, of course, to the German term for rabbit—Hase. But what inspired you to dub Lolita's aging innamorato with such engaging redundancy?

That, too, was easy. The double rumble is, I think, very nasty, very suggestive. It is a hateful name for a hateful person. It is also a kingly name, and I did need a royal vibration for Humbert the Fierce and Humbert the Humble. Lends itself also to a number of puns. And the execrable diminutive "Hum" is on a par, socially and emotionally, with "Lo," as her mother calls her.

Another critic has written of you that "the task of sifting and selecting just the right succession of words from that multilingual memory, and of arranging their many-mirrored nuances into the proper juxtapositions, must be psychically exhausting work." Which of all your books, in this sense, would you say was the most difficult to write?

Oh, *Lolita*, naturally. I lacked the necessary information—that was the initial difficulty. I did not know any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita. It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by a similar task, with a lesser amount of time at my disposal. The obtaining of such local ingredients as would allow me to inject average "reality" into the brew of individual fancy proved, at fifty, a much more difficult process than it had been in the Europe of my youth.

Though born in Russia, you have lived and worked for many years in America as well as in Europe. Do you feel any strong sense of national identity?

I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home. It so happened that I was immediately exposed

to the very best in America, to its rich intellectual life and to its easygoing, good-natured atmosphere. I immersed myself in its great libraries and its Grand Canyon. I worked in the laboratories of its zoological museums. I acquired more friends than I ever had in Europe. My books—old books and new ones—found some admirable readers. I became as stout as Cortez—mainly because I quit smoking and started to munch molasses candy instead, with the result that my weight went up from my usual 140 to a monumental and cheerful 200. In consequence, I am one-third American—good American flesh keeping me warm and safe.

You spent 20 years in America, and yet you never owned a home or had a really settled establishment there. Your friends report that you camped impermanently in motels, cabins, furnished apartments and the rented homes of professors away on leave. Did you feel so restless or so alien that the idea of settling down anywhere disturbed you?

The main reason, the background reason, is, I suppose, that nothing short of a replica of my childhood surroundings would have satisfied me. I would never manage to match my memories correctly—so why trouble with hopeless approximations? Then there are some special considerations: for instance, the question of impetus, the habit of impetus. I propelled myself out of Russia so vigorously, with such indignant force, that I have been rolling on and on ever since. True, I have rolled and lived to become that appetizing thing, a “full professor,” but at heart I have always remained a lean “visiting lecturer.” The few times I said to myself anywhere: “Now, that’s a nice spot for a permanent home,” I would immediately hear in my mind the thunder of an avalanche carrying away the hundreds of far places which I would destroy by the very act of settling in one particular nook of the earth. And finally, I don’t much care for furniture, for tables and chairs and lamps and rugs and things—perhaps because in my opulent childhood

I was taught to regard with amused contempt any too-earnest attachment to material wealth, which is why I felt no regret and no bitterness when the Revolution abolished that wealth.

You lived in Russia for twenty years, in West Europe for 20 years, and in America for twenty years. But in 1960, after the success of Lolita, you moved to France and Switzerland and have not returned to the U.S. since. Does this mean, despite your self-identification as an American writer, that you consider your American period over?

I am living in Switzerland for purely private reasons—family reasons and certain professional ones too, such as some special research for a special book. I hope to return very soon to America—back to its library stacks and mountain passes. An ideal arrangement would be an absolutely soundproofed flat in New York, on a top floor—no feet walking above, no soft music anywhere—and a bungalow in the Southwest. Sometimes I think it might be fun to adorn a university again, residing and writing there, not teaching, or at least not teaching regularly.

Meanwhile you remain secluded—and somewhat sedentary, from all reports—in your hotel suite. How do you spend your time?

I awake around seven in winter: my alarm clock is an Alpine chough—big, glossy, black thing with big yellow beak—which visits the balcony and emits a most melodious chuckle. For a while I lie in bed mentally revising and planning things. Around eight: shave, breakfast, enthroned meditation, and bath—in that order. Then I work till lunch in my study, taking time out for a short stroll with my wife along the lake. Practically all the famous Russian writers of the nineteenth century have rambled here at one time or another. Zhukovski, Gogol, Dostoevski, Tolstoy—who courted the hotel chambermaids to the detriment of his health—and many Russian poets. But then, as much could

be said of Nice or Rome. We lunch around one P.M., and I am back at my desk by half-past one and work steadily till half-past six. Then a stroll to a newsstand for the English papers, and dinner at seven. No work after dinner. And bed around nine. I read till half-past eleven, and then tussle with insomnia till one A.M. About twice a week I have a good, long nightmare with unpleasant characters imported from earlier dreams, appearing in more or less iterative surroundings—kaleidoscopic arrangements of broken impressions, fragments of day thoughts, and irresponsible mechanical images, utterly lacking any possible Freudian implication or explication, but singularly akin to the procession of changing figures that one usually sees on the inner palpebral screen when closing one's weary eyes.

Funny that witch doctors and their patients have never hit on that simple and absolutely satisfying explanation of dreaming. Is it true that you write standing up, and that you write in longhand rather than on a typewriter?

Yes. I never learned to type. I generally start the day at a lovely old-fashioned lectern I have in my study. Later on, when I feel gravity nibbling at my calves, I settle down in a comfortable armchair alongside an ordinary writing desk; and finally, when gravity begins climbing up my spine, I lie down on a couch in a corner of my small study. It is a pleasant solar routine. But when I was young, in my twenties and early thirties, I would often stay all day in bed, smoking and writing. Now things have changed. Horizontal prose, vertical verse, and sedent scholia keep swapping qualifiers and spoiling the alliteration.

Can you tell us something more about the actual creative process involved in the germination of a book—perhaps by reading a few random notes for or excerpts from a work in progress?

Certainly not. No fetus should undergo an exploratory operation. But I can do something else. This box contains

index cards with some notes I made at various times more or less recently and discarded when writing *Pale Fire*. It's a little batch of rejects. Help yourself. "Selene, the moon. Selenginsk, an old town in Siberia: moon-rocket town" . . . "Berry: the black knob on the bill of the mute swan" . . . "Dropworm: a small caterpillar hanging on a thread" . . . "In *The New Bon Ton Magazine*, volume five, 1820, page 312, prostitutes are termed 'girls of the town'" . . . "Youth dreams: forgot pants; old man dreams: forgot dentures" . . . "Student explains that when reading a novel he likes to skip passages 'so as to get his own idea about the book and not be influenced by the author'" . . . "Naprapathy: the ugliest word in the language."

"And after rain, on beaded wires, one bird, two birds, three birds, and none. Muddy tires, sun" . . . "Time without consciousness—lower animal world; time with consciousness—man; consciousness without time—some still higher state" . . . "We think not in words but in shadows of words. James Joyce's mistake in those otherwise marvelous mental soliloquies of his consists in that he gives too much verbal body to thoughts" . . . "Parody of politeness: That inimitable 'Please' —'Please send me your beautiful——' which firms idiotically address to themselves in printed forms meant for people ordering their product." . . .

"Naive, nonstop, peep-peep twitter of chicks in dismal crates late, late at night, on a desolate frost-bedimmed station platform" . . . "The tabloid headline **TORSO KILLER MAY BEAT CHAIR** might be translated: '*Celui qui tue un buste peut bien battre une chaise*'" . . . "Newspaper vendor, handing me a magazine with my story: 'I see you made the slicks.' " "Snow falling, young father out with tiny child, nose like a pink cherry. Why does a parent immediately say something to his or her child if a stranger smiles at the latter? 'Sure,' said the father to the infant's interrogatory gurgle, which had been going on for some time, and would have been left to go on in the quiet falling

snow, had I not smiled in passing" . . . "Inter-columniation: dark-blue sky between two white columns." . . . "Place-name in the Orkneys: Papilio" . . . "Not 'I, too, lived in Arcadia,' but 'I,' says Death, even am in Arcadia'—legend on a shepherd's tomb (*Notes and Queries*, June 13, 1868, p. 561)" . . . "Marat collected butterflies" . . . "From the aesthetic point of view, the tapeworm is certainly an undesirable boarder. The gravid segments frequently crawl out of a person's anal canal, sometimes in chains, and have been reported a source of social embarrassment." (*Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci.* 48:558).

What inspires you to record and collect such disconnected impressions and quotations?

All I know is that at a very early stage of the novel's development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles. Nobody will ever discover how clearly a bird visualizes, or if it visualizes at all, the future nest and the eggs in it. When I remember afterwards the force that made me jot down the correct names of things, or the inches and tints of things, even before I actually needed the information, I am inclined to assume that what I call, for want of a better term, inspiration, had been already at work, mutely pointing at this or that, having me accumulate the known materials for an unknown structure. After the first shock of recognition—a sudden sense of "*this* is what I'm going to write"—the novel starts to breed by itself; the process goes on solely in the mind, not on paper; and to be aware of the stage it has reached at any given moment, I do not have to be conscious of every exact phrase. I feel a kind of gentle development, an uncurling inside, and I know that the details are there already, that in fact I would see them plainly if I looked closer, if I stopped the machine and opened its inner compartment; but I prefer to wait until what is loosely called inspiration has completed the task for me. There comes a moment when I am

informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete. Every card is rewritten many times. About three cards make one typewritten page, and when finally I feel that the conceived picture has been copied by me as faithfully as physically possible—a few vacant lots always remain, alas—then I dictate the novel to my wife who types it out in triplicate.

In what sense do you copy “the conceived picture” of a novel?

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should *know* the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the market place. Art is never simple. To return to my lecturing days: I automatically gave low marks when a student used the dreadful phrase “sincere and simple”—“Flaubert writes with a style which is always simple and sincere”—under the impression that this was the greatest compliment payable to prose or poetry. When I struck the phrase out, which I did with such rage in my pencil that it ripped the paper, the student complained that this was what teachers had always taught

him: "Art is simple, art is sincere." Someday I must trace this vulgar absurdity to its source. A schoolmarm in Ohio? A progressive ass in New York? Because, of course, art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex.

In terms of modern art, critical opinion is divided about the sincerity or deceitfulness, simplicity or complexity, of contemporary abstract painting. What is your own opinion?

I do not see any essential difference between abstract and primitive art. Both are simple and sincere. Naturally, we should not generalize in these matters: it is the individual artist that counts. But if we accept for a moment the general notion of "modern art," then we must admit that the trouble with it is that it is so commonplace, imitative, and academic. Blurs and blotches have merely replaced the mass prettiness of a hundred years ago, pictures of Italian girls, handsome beggars, romantic ruins, and so forth. But just as among those corny oils there might occur the work of a true artist with a richer play of light and shade, with some original streak of violence or tenderness, so among the corn of primitive and abstract art one may come across a flash of great talent. Only talent interests me in paintings and books. Not general ideas, but the individual contribution.

A contribution to society?

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth. Although I do not care for the slogan "art for art's sake"—because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists—there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.

What do you want to accomplish or leave behind—or should this be of no concern to the writer?

Well, in this matter of accomplishment, of course, I don't have a 35-year plan or program, but I have a fair inkling of my literary afterlife. I have sensed certain hints, I have felt the breeze of certain promises. No doubt there will be ups and downs, long periods of slump. With the Devil's connivance, I open a newspaper of 2063 and in some article on the books page I find: "Nobody reads Nabokov or Fulmerford today." Awful question: Who is this unfortunate Fulmerford?

While we're on the subject of self-appraisal, what do you regard as your principal failing as a writer—apart from forgetability?

Lack of spontaneity; the nuisance of parallel thoughts, second thoughts, third thoughts; inability to express myself properly in any language unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk.

You're doing rather well at the moment, if we may say so.

It's an illusion.

Your reply might be taken as confirmation of critical comments that you are "an incorrigible leg puller," "a mystifier," and "a literary agent provocateur." How do you view yourself?

I think my favorite fact about myself is that I have never been dismayed by a critic's bilge or bile, and have never once in my life asked or thanked a reviewer for a review. My second favorite fact—or shall I stop at one?

No, please go on.

The fact that since my youth—I was 19 when I left Russia—my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom

of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. My desires are modest. Portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through earphones, or played in theaters.

Why no music?

I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly. When I attend a concert—which happens about once in five years—I endeavor gamely to follow the sequence and relationship of sounds but cannot keep it up for more than a few minutes. Visual impressions, reflections of hands in lacquered wood, a diligent bald spot over a fiddle, these take over, and soon I am bored beyond measure by the motions of the musicians. My knowledge of music is very slight; and I have a special reason for finding my ignorance and inability so sad, so unjust: There is a wonderful singer in my family—my own son. His great gifts, the rare beauty of his bass, and the promise of a splendid career—all this affects me deeply, and I feel a fool during a technical conversation among musicians. I am perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature, especially in matters of structure, but what can I do if ear and brain refuse to cooperate? I have found a queer substitute for music in chess—more exactly, in the composing of chess problems.

Another substitute, surely, has been your own euphonious prose and poetry. As one of few authors who have written with eloquence in more than one language, how would you characterize the textural differences between Russian and English, in which you are regarded as equally facile?

In sheer number of words, English is far richer than Russian. This is especially noticeable in nouns and adjectives. A very bothersome feature that Russian presents is the dearth, vagueness, and clumsiness of technical terms.

For example, the simple phrase “to park a car” comes out—if translated back from the Russian—as “to leave an automobile standing for a long time.” Russian, at least polite Russian, is more formal than polite English. Thus, the Russian word for “sexual”—*polovoy*—is slightly indecent and not to be bandied around. The same applies to Russian terms rendering various anatomical and biological notions that are frequently and familiarly expressed in English conversation. On the other hand, there are words rendering certain nuances of motion and gesture and emotion in which Russian excels. Thus by changing the head of a verb, for which one may have a dozen different prefixes to choose from, one is able to make Russian express extremely fine shades of duration and intensity. English is, syntactically, an extremely flexible medium, but Russian can be given even more subtle twists and turns. Translating Russian into English is a little easier than translating English into Russian, and 10 times easier than translating English into French.

You have said you will never write another novel in Russian. Why?

During the great, and still unsung, era of Russian intellectual expatriation—roughly between 1920 and 1940—books written in Russian by émigré Russians and published by émigré firms abroad were eagerly bought or borrowed by émigré readers but were absolutely banned in Soviet Russia—as they still are (except in the case of a few dead authors such as Kuprin and Bunin, whose heavily censored works have been recently reprinted there), no matter the theme of the story or poem. An émigré novel, published, say, in Paris and sold over all free Europe, might have, in those years, a total sale of 1,000 or 2,000 copies—that would be a best seller—but every copy would also pass from hand to hand and be read by at least 20 persons, and at least 50 annually if stocked by Russian lending libraries, of which there were hundreds in West Europe alone. The era

of expatriation can be said to have ended during World War II. Old writers died, Russian publishers also vanished, and worst of all, the general atmosphere of exile culture, with its splendor, and vigor, and purity, and reverberative force, dwindled to a sprinkle of Russian-language periodicals, anemic in talent and provincial in tone. Now to take my own case: It was not the financial side that really mattered; I don't think my Russian writings ever brought me more than a few hundred dollars per year, and I am all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone—one's own self. But one also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate multiplication of one's self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one's desk, one would expect it to be at least a sonorous void, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell. With the passing of years I grew less and less interested in Russia and more and more indifferent to the once-harrowing thought that my books would remain banned there as long as my contempt for the police state and political oppression prevented me from entertaining the vaguest thought of return. No, I will not write another novel in Russian, though I do allow myself a very few short poems now and then. I wrote my last Russian novel a quarter of a century ago. But today, in compensation, in a spirit of justice to my little American muse, I am doing something else. But perhaps I should not talk about it at this early stage.

Please do.

Well, it occurred to me one day—while I was glancing at the varicolored spines of *Lolita* translations into languages I do not read, such as Japanese, Finnish or Arabic—that the list of unavoidable blunders in these fifteen or twenty versions would probably make, if collected, a fatter volume than any of them. I had checked the French translation, which was basically very good yet would have bristled with unavoidable errors had I not corrected them. But what

could I do with Portuguese or Hebrew or Danish? Then I imagined something else. I imagined that in some distant future somebody might produce a Russian version of *Lolita*. I trained my inner telescope upon that particular point in the distant future and I saw that every paragraph, pock-marked as it is with pitfalls, could lend itself to hideous mistranslation. In the hands of a harmful drudge, the Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders. So I decided to translate it myself. Up to now I have about sixty pages ready.

Are you presently at work on any new project?

Good question, as they say on the lesser screen. I have just finished correcting the last proofs of my work on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*—four fat little volumes which are to appear this year in the Bollingen Series; the actual translation of the poem occupies a small section of volume one. The rest of the volume and volumes two, three and four contain copious notes on the subject. This opus owes its birth to a casual remark my wife made in 1950—in response to my disgust with rhymed paraphrases of *Eugene Onegin*, every line of which I had to revise for my students—“Why don't you translate it yourself?” This is the result. It has taken some ten years of labor. The index alone runs to 5,000 cards in three long shoe boxes; you see them over there on that shelf. My translation is, of course, a literal one, a crib, a pony. And to the fidelity of transposal I have sacrificed everything: elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar.

In view of these admitted flaws, are you looking forward to reading the reviews of the book?

I really don't read reviews about myself with any special eagerness or attention unless they are masterpieces of wit and acumen—which does happen now and then. And I

never reread them, though my wife collects the stuff, and though maybe I shall use a spatter of the more hilarious *Lolita* items to write someday a brief history of the nymphet's tribulations. I remember, however, quite vividly, certain attacks by Russian émigré critics who wrote about my first novels 30 years ago; not that I was more vulnerable then, but my memory was certainly more retentive and enterprising, and I was a reviewer myself. In the nineteen-twenties I was clawed at by a certain Mochulski who could never stomach my utter indifference to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church—any church. There were other critics who could not forgive me for keeping aloof from literary “movements,” for not airing the “*angoisse*” that they wanted poets to feel, and for not belonging to any of those groups of poets that held sessions of common inspiration in the back rooms of Parisian cafés. There was also the amusing case of Georgiy Ivanov, a good poet but a scurrilous critic. I never met him or his literary wife Irina Odoevtsev; but one day in the late nineteen-twenties or early nineteen-thirties, at a time when I regularly reviewed books for an émigré newspaper in Berlin, she sent me from Paris a copy of a novel of hers with the wily inscription “*Spasibo za Korolya, damu, valeta*” (thanks for *King, Queen, Knave*)—which I was free to understand as “Thanks for writing that book,” but which might also provide her with the alibi: “Thanks for sending me your book,” though I never sent her anything. *Her* book proved to be pitifully trite, and I said so in a brief and nasty review. Ivanov retaliated with a grossly personal article about me and my stuff. The possibility of venting or distilling friendly or unfriendly feelings through the medium of literary criticism is what makes that art such a skewy one.

You have been quoted as saying: My pleasures are the most intense known to man: butterfly hunting and writing. Are they in any way comparable?

No, they belong essentially to quite different types of

enjoyment. Neither is easy to describe to a person who has not experienced it, and each is so obvious to the one who has that a description would sound crude and redundant. In the case of butterfly hunting I think I can distinguish four main elements. First, the hope of capturing—or the actual capturing—of the first specimen of a species unknown to science: this is the dream at the back of every lepidopterist's mind, whether he be climbing a mountain in New Guinea or crossing a bog in Maine. Secondly, there is the capture of a very rare or very local butterfly—things you have gloated over in books, in obscure scientific reviews, on the splendid plates of famous works, and that you now see on the wing, in their natural surroundings, among plants and minerals that acquire a mysterious magic through the intimate association with the rarities they produce and support, so that a given landscape lives twice: as a delightful wilderness in its own right and as the haunt of a certain butterfly or moth. Thirdly, there is the naturalist's interest in disentangling the life histories of little-known insects, in learning about their habits and structure, and in determining their position in the scheme of classification—a scheme which can be sometimes pleasurably exploded in a dazzling display of polemical fireworks when a new discovery upsets the old scheme and confounds its obtuse champions. And fourthly, one should not ignore the element of sport, of luck, of brisk motion and robust achievement, of an ardent and arduous quest ending in the silky triangle of a folded butterfly lying on the palm of one's hand.

What about the pleasures of writing?

They correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or—which is the same thing—by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artistic reader whom this combination satisfies.

Every good reader has enjoyed a few good books in his life so why analyze delights that both sides know? I write mainly for artists, fellow-artists and follow-artists. However, I could never explain adequately to certain students in my literature classes, the aspects of good reading—the fact that you read an artist's book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine. "Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel." I wonder if I shall ever measure again with happy hands the breadth of a lectern and plunge into my notes before the sympathetic abyss of a college audience.

What is your reaction to the mixed feelings vented by one critic in a review which characterized you as having a fine and original mind, but "not much trace of a generalizing intellect," and as "the typical artist who distrusts ideas"?

In much the same solemn spirit, certain crusty lepidopterists have criticized my works on the classification of butterflies, accusing me of being more interested in the subspecies and the subgenus than in the genus and the family. This kind of attitude is a matter of mental temperament, I suppose. The middlebrow or the upper Philistine cannot get rid of the furtive feeling that a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas. Oh, I know the type, the dreary type! He likes a good yarn spiced with social comment; he likes to recognize his own thoughts and throes in those of the author; he wants at least one of the characters to be the author's stooge. If American, he has a dash of Marxist blood, and if British, he is acutely and ridiculously class-conscious; he finds it so much easier to write about ideas than about words; he does not realize that perhaps the reason he does not find general ideas in a particular writer is that the particular ideas of that writer have not yet become general.

Dostoevski, who dealt with themes accepted by most readers as universal in both scope and significance, is considered one of the world's great authors. Yet you have described him as "a cheap sensationalist, clumsy and vulgar." Why?

Non-Russian readers do not realize two things: that not all Russians love Dostoevski as much as Americans do, and that most of those Russians who do, venerate him as a mystic and not as an artist. He was a prophet, a claptrap journalist and a slapdash comedian. I admit that some of his scenes, some of his tremendous, farcical rows are extraordinarily amusing. But his sensitive murderers and soulful prostitutes are not to be endured for one moment—by this reader anyway.

Is it true that you have called Hemingway and Conrad "writers of books for boys"?

That's exactly what they are. Hemingway is certainly the better of the two; he has at least a voice of his own and is responsible for that delightful, highly artistic short story, "The Killers." And the description of the iridescent fish and rhythmic urination in his famous fish story is superb. But I cannot abide Conrad's souvenir-shop style, bottled ships and shell necklaces of romanticist clichés. In neither of those two writers can I find anything that I would care to have written myself. In mentality and emotion, they are hopelessly juvenile, and the same can be said of some other beloved authors, the pets of the common room, the consolation and support of graduate students, such as—but some are still alive, and I hate to hurt living old boys while the dead ones are not yet buried.

What did you read when you were a boy?

Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry—English, Russian and French—than in any other five-year period of my life. I relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning,

Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Alexander Blok. On another level, my heroes were the Scarlet Pimpernel, Phileas Fogg, and Sherlock Holmes. In other words, I was a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library. At a later period, in Western Europe, between the ages of 20 and 40, my favorites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson, Joyce, Proust, and Pushkin. Of these top favorites, several—Poe, Jules Verne, Emmuska Orczy, Conan Doyle, and Rupert Brooke—have lost the glamour and thrill they held for me. The others remain intact and by now are probably beyond change as far as I am concerned. I was never exposed in the twenties and thirties, as so many of my coevals have been, to the poetry of the not quite first-rate Eliot and of definitely second-rate Pound. I read them late in the season, around 1945, in the guest room of an American friend's house, and not only remained completely indifferent to them, but could not understand why anybody should bother about them. But I suppose that they preserve some sentimental value for such readers as discovered them at an earlier age than I did.

What are your reading habits today?

Usually I read several books at a time—old books, new books, fiction, nonfiction, verse, anything—and when the bedside heap of a dozen volumes or so has dwindled to two or three, which generally happens by the end of one week, I accumulate another pile. There are some varieties of fiction that I never touch—mystery stories, for instance, which I abhor, and historical novels. I also detest the so-called “powerful” novel—full of commonplace obscenities and torrents of dialogue—in fact, when I receive a new novel from a hopeful publisher—“hoping that I like the book as much as he does”—I check first of all how much dialogue there is, and if it looks too abundant or too sustained, I shut the book with a bang and ban it from my bed.

Are there any contemporary authors you do enjoy reading?

I do have a few favorites—for example, Robbe-Grillet and Borges. How freely and gratefully one breathes in their marvelous labyrinths! I love their lucidity of thought, the purity and poetry, the mirage in the mirror.

Many critics feel that this description applies no less aptly to your own prose. To what extent do you feel that prose and poetry intermingle as art forms?

Except that I started earlier—that's the answer to the first part of your question. As to the second: Well, poetry, of course, includes all creative writing; I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation. As in today's scientific classifications, there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor.

You have also written that poetry represents "the mysteries of the irrational perceived through rational words." But many feel that the "irrational" has little place in an age when the exact knowledge of science has begun to plumb the most profound mysteries of existence. Do you agree?

This appearance is very deceptive. It is a journalistic illusion. In point of fact, the greater one's science, the deeper the sense of mystery. Moreover, I don't believe that any science today has pierced any mystery. We, as newspaper readers, are inclined to call "science" the cleverness of an electrician or a psychiatrist's mumbo jumbo. This, at

best, is applied science, and one of the characteristics of applied science is that yesterday's neutron or today's truth dies tomorrow. But even in a better sense of "science"—as the study of visible and palpable nature, or the poetry of pure mathematics and pure philosophy—the situation remains as hopeless as ever. We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought.

Man's understanding of these mysteries is embodied in his concept of a Divine Being. As a final question, do you believe in God?

To be quite candid—and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill—I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.

4

On August 18, 1964, Jane Howard of *Life* magazine sent me eleven questions. I have kept the typescript of my replies. In mid-September she arrived in Montreux with the photographer Henry Grossman. Text and pictures appeared in the November 20 issue of *Life*.

What writers and persons and places have influenced you most?

In my boyhood I was an extraordinarily avid reader. By the age of 14 or 15 I had read or re-read all Tolstoy in Russian, all Shakespeare in English, and all Flaubert in French—besides hundreds of other books. Today I can always tell when a sentence I compose happens to resemble in cut and intonation that of any of the writers I loved or detested half a century ago; but I do not believe that any particular writer has had any definite influence upon me. As to the influence of places and persons, I owe many metaphors and sensuous associations to the North Russian landscape of my boyhood, and I am also aware that my father was responsible for my appreciating very early in life the thrill of a great poem.

Have you ever seriously contemplated a career other than in letters?

Frankly, I never thought of letters as a career. Writing has always been for me a blend of dejection and high spirits, a torture and a pastime—but I never expected it to be a source of income. On the other hand, I have often

dreamt of a long and exciting career as an obscure curator of lepidoptera in a great museum.

Which of your writings has pleased you most?

I would say that of all my books *Lolita* has left me with the most pleasurable afterglow—perhaps because it is the purest of all, the most abstract and carefully contrived. I am probably responsible for the odd fact that people don't seem to name their daughters Lolita any more. I have heard of young female poodles being given that name since 1956, but of no human beings. Well-wishers have tried to translate *Lolita* into Russian, but with such execrable results that I'm now doing a translation myself. The word "jeans," for example, is translated in Russian dictionaries as "wide, short trousers"—a totally unsatisfactory definition.

In the foreword to The Defense you allude to psychiatry. Do you think the dependence of analyzed on analysts is a great danger?

I cannot conceive how anybody in his right mind should go to a psychoanalyst, but of course if one's mind is deranged one might try anything; after all, quacks and cranks, shamans and holy men, kings and hypnotists have cured people—especially hysterical people. Our grandsons no doubt will regard today's psychoanalysts with the same amused contempt as we do astrology and phrenology. One of the greatest pieces of charlatanic, and satanic, nonsense imposed on a gullible public is the Freudian interpretation of dreams. I take gleeful pleasure every morning in refuting the Viennese quack by recalling and explaining the details of my dreams without using one single reference to sexual symbols or mythical complexes. I urge my potential patients to do likewise.

How do your views on politics and religion affect what you write?

I have never belonged to any political party but have always loathed and despised dictatorships and police states,

as well as any sort of oppression. This goes for regimentation of thought, governmental censorship, racial or religious persecution, and all the rest of it. Whether or not my simple credo affects my writing does not interest me. I suppose that my indifference to religion is of the same nature as my dislike of group activities in the domain of political or civic commitments. I have allowed some of my creatures in some of my novels to be restless freethinkers but here again I do not care one bit what kind of faith or brand of non-faith my reader may assign to their maker.

Would you have liked to have lived at a time other than this?

My choice of "when" would be influenced by that of "where." As a matter of fact, I would have to construct a mosaic of time and space to suit my desires and demands. It would be too complicated to tabulate all the elements of this combination. But I know pretty well what it should include. It should include a warm climate, daily baths, an absence of radio music and traffic noise, the honey of ancient Persia, a complete microfilm library, and the unique and indescribable rapture of learning more and more about the moon and the planets. In other words, I think I would like my head to be in the United States of the nineteen-sixties, but would not mind distributing some of my other organs and limbs through various centuries and countries.

With what living writers do you feel a particular sympathy?

When Mr. N. learns from an interview that Mr. X., another writer, has named as his favorites Mr. A., Mr. B. and Mr. N., this inclusion may puzzle Mr. N. who considers, say, Mr. A.'s work to be primitive and trite. I would not like to puzzle Mr. C., Mr. D., or Mr. X., all of whom I like.

Do you anticipate that more of your works will be made into films? On the basis of Lolita, does the prospect please you?

I greatly admired the film *Lolita* as a film—but was sorry not to have been given an opportunity to collaborate in its actual making. People who liked my novel said the film was too reticent and incomplete. If, however, all the next pictures based on my books are as charming as Kubrick's, I shall not grumble too much.

Which of the languages you speak do you consider the most beautiful?

My head says English, my heart, Russian, my ear, French.

Why do you prefer Montreux as a headquarters? Do you in any way miss the America you parodied so exquisitely in Lolita? Do you find that Europe and the US are coming to resemble each other to a discouraging degree?

I think I am trying to develop, in this rosy exile, the same fertile nostalgia in regard to America, my new country, as I evolved for Russia, my old one, in the first post-revolution years of West-European expatriation. Of course, I miss America—even Miss America. If Europe and America are coming to resemble each other more and more—why should I be discouraged? Amusing, perhaps, and, perhaps, not quite true, but certainly not discouraging in any sense I can think of. My wife and I are very fond of Montreux, the scenery of which I needed for *Pale Fire*, and still need for another book. There are also family reasons for our living in this part of Europe. I have a sister in Geneva and a son in Milan. He is a graduate of Harvard who came to Italy to complete his operatic training, which he combines with racing an Italian car in major events and translating the early works of his father from Russian into English.

What is your prognosis for the health of Russian letters?

There is no plain answer to your question. The trouble is that no government however intelligent or humane is capable of generating great artists, although a bad government certainly can pester, thwart, and suppress them. We must also remember—and this is very important—that the only people who flourish under all types of government are the Philistines. In the aura of mild regimes there is exactly as rare a chance of a great artist's appearing on the scene as there is in the less happy times of despicable dictatorships. Therefore I cannot predict anything though I certainly hope that under the influence of the West, and especially under that of America, the Soviet police state will gradually wither away. Incidentally, I deplore the attitude of foolish or dishonest people who ridiculously equate Stalin with McCarthy, Auschwitz with the atom bomb, and the ruthless imperialism of the USSR with the earnest and unselfish assistance extended by the USA to nations in distress.

P.S.

Dear Miss Howard, allow me to add the following three points:

- 1) My answers must be published accurately and completely: verbatim, if quoted; in a faithful version, if not.
- 2) I must see the proofs of the interview—semifinal and final.
- 3) I have the right to correct therein all factual errors and specific slips ("Mr. Nabokov is a small man with long hair," etc.)

5

In September, 1965, Robert Hughes visited me here to make a filmed interview for the Television 13 Educational Program in New York. At our initial meetings I read from prepared cards, and this part of the interview is given below. The rest, represented by some fifty pages typed from the tape, is too colloquial and rambling to suit the scheme of the present book.

As with Gogol and even James Agee, there is occasionally confusion about the pronunciation of your last name. How does one pronounce it correctly?

It is indeed a tricky name. It is often misspelt, because the eye tends to regard the “a” of the first syllable as a misprint and then tries to restore the symmetrical sequence by triplicating the “o”—filling up the row of circles, so to speak, as in a game of crosses and naughts. No—bow—cough. How ugly, how wrong. Every author whose name is fairly often mentioned in periodicals develops a bird-watcher’s or caterpillar-picker’s knack when scanning an article. But in my case I always get caught by the word “nobody” when capitalized at the beginning of a sentence. As to pronunciation, Frenchmen of course say Nabokoff, with the accent on the last syllable. Englishmen say Nabokov, accent on the first, and Italians say Nabokov, accent in the middle, as Russians also do. Na—bo—kov. A heavy open “o” as in “Knickerbocker”. My New England

ear is not offended by the long elegant middle “o” of Nabokov as delivered in American academies. The awful “Na–bah–kov” is a despicable gutterism. Well, you can make your choice now. Incidentally, the first name is pronounced Vladeemer—rhyming with “redeemer”—not Vladimir rhyming with Faddimere (a place in England, I think).

How about the name of your extraordinary creature, Professor P–N–I–N?

The “p” is sounded, that’s all. But since the “p” is mute in English words starting with “pn”, one is prone to insert a supporting “uh” sound—“Puh–nin”—which is wrong. To get the “pn” right, try the combination “Up North”, or still better “Up, Nina!”, leaving out the initial “u”. Pnorth, Pnina, Pnin. Can you do that? . . . That’s fine.

You’re responsible for brilliant summaries of the lives and works of Pushkin and Gogol. How would you summarize your own?

It is not so easy to summarize something which is not quite finished yet. However, as I’ve pointed out elsewhere, the first part of my life is marked by a rather pleasing chronological neatness. I spent my first twenty years in Russia, the next twenty in Western Europe, and the twenty years after that, from 1940 to 1960, in America. I’ve been living in Europe again for five years now, but I cannot promise to stay around another fifteen so as to retain the rhythm. Nor can I predict what new books I may write. My best Russian novel is a thing called, in English, *The Gift*. My two best American ones are *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

I am now in the process of translating *Lolita* into Russian, which is like completing the circle of my creative life. Or rather starting a new spiral. I’ve lots of difficulties with technical terms, especially with those pertaining to the motor car, which has not really blended with Russian life as it, or rather she, has with American life. I also have trouble

with finding the right Russian terms for clothes, varieties of shoes, items of furniture, and so on. On the other hand, descriptions of tender emotions, of my nymphet's grace and of the soft, melting American landscape slip very delicately into lyrical Russian. The book will be published in America or perhaps Paris; traveling poets and diplomats will smuggle it into Russia, I hope. Shall I read three lines of this Russian version? Of course, incredible as it may seem, perhaps not everybody remembers the way *Lolita* starts in English. So perhaps I should do the first lines in English first. Note that for the necessary effect of dreamy tenderness both "l"s and the "t" and indeed the whole word should be iberized and not pronounced the American way with crushed "l"s, a coarse "t", and a long "o": "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta." Now comes the Russian. Here the first syllable of her name sounds more like an "ah" sound than an "o" sound, but the rest is like Spanish: (*Reads in Russian*) "*Lah-lee-ta, svet moey zhizni, ogon' moih chresel. Greb moy, dusha moya.*" And so on.

Beyond what's stated and implied in your various prefaces, have you anything to add about your readers and/or your critics?

Well, when I think about critics in general, I divide the family of critics into three subfamilies. First, professional reviewers, mainly hacks or hicks, regularly filling up their allotted space in the cemeteries of Sunday papers. Secondly, more ambitious critics who every other year collect their magazine articles into volumes with allusive scholarly titles—*The Undiscovered Country*, that kind of thing. And thirdly, my fellow writers, who review a book they like or loathe. Many bright blurbs and dark feuds have been engendered that way. When an author whose work I admire praises my work, I cannot help experiencing, besides a ripple of almost human warmth, a sense of harmony and satisfied logic. But I have also the idiotic feeling that he or

she will very soon cool down and vaguely turn away if I do not do something at once, but I don't know what to do, and I never do anything, and next morning cold clouds conceal the bright mountains. In all other cases, I must confess, I yawn and forget. Of course, every worthwhile author has quite a few clowns and criticules—wonderful word: criticules, or criticasters—around him, demolishing one another rather than him with their slapsticks. Then, also, my various disgusts which I like to voice now and then seem to irritate people. I happen to find second-rate and ephemeral the works of a number of puffed-up writers—such as Camus, Lorca, Kazantzakis, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Thomas Wolfe, and literally hundreds of other “great” second-raters. And for this, of course, I'm automatically disliked by their camp-followers, kitsch-followers, fashion-followers, and all kinds of automatons. Generally speaking, I'm supremely indifferent to adverse criticism in regard to my fiction. But on the other hand, I enjoy retaliating when some pompous dunce finds fault with my translations and divulges a farcical ignorance of the Russian language and literature.

Would you describe your first reactions to America? And how you first came to write in English?

I had started rather sporadically to compose in English a few years before migrating to America, where I arrived in the lilac mist of a May morning, May 28, 1940. In the late thirties, when living in Germany and France, I had translated two of my Russian books into English and had written my first straight English novel, the one about Sebastian Knight. Then, in America, I stopped writing in my native tongue altogether except for an occasional poem which, incidentally, caused my Russian poetry to improve rather oddly in urgency and concentration. My complete switch from Russian prose to English prose was exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion. I have described the writing of *Lolita* in the afterpiece appended in '58 to the

American edition. The book was first published in Paris at a time when nobody else wanted it, 10 years ago now—10 years—how time crawls!

As to *Pale Fire*, although I had devised some odds and ends of Zemblan lore in the late fifties in Ithaca, New York, I felt the first real pang of the novel, a rather complete vision of its structure in miniature, and jotted it down—I have it in one of my pocket diaries—while sailing from New York to France in 1959. The American poem discussed in the book by His Majesty, Charles of Zembla, was the hardest stuff I ever had to compose. Most of it I wrote in Nice, in winter, walking along the Promenade des Anglais or rambling in the neighboring hills. A good deal of Kinbote's commentary was written here in the Montreux Palace garden, one of the most enchanting and inspiring gardens I know.* I'm especially fond of its weeping cedar, the arboreal counterpart of a very shaggy dog with hair hanging over its eyes.

What is your approach to the teaching of literature?

I can give you some examples. When studying Kafka's famous story, my students had to know exactly what kind of insect Gregor turned into (it was a domed beetle, not the flat cockroach of sloppy translators) and they had to be able to describe exactly the arrangement of the rooms, with the position of doors and furniture, in the Samsa family's flat. They had to know the map of Dublin for *Ulysses*. I believe in stressing the specific detail; the general ideas can take care of themselves. *Ulysses*, of course, is a divine work of art and will live on despite the academic nonentities who turn it into a collection of symbols or Greek myths. I once gave a student a C-minus, or perhaps a D-plus, just for applying to its chapters the titles borrowed from Homer while not even noticing the comings and goings of the man in the brown mackintosh. He didn't even know who the man in

*Now disfigured by a tennis court and a parking place.

the brown mackintosh was. Oh, yes, let people compare me to Joyce by all means, but my English is patball to Joyce's champion game.

How did you come to live in Switzerland?

The older I get and the more I weigh, the harder it is for me to get out of this or that comfortable armchair or deckchair into which I have sunk with an exhalation of content. Nowadays I find it as difficult to travel from Montreux to Lausanne as to travel to Paris, London, or New York. On the other hand, I'm ready to walk 10 or 15 miles per day, up and down mountain trails, in search of butterflies, as I do every summer. One of the reasons I live in Montreux is because I find the view from my easy chair wonderfully soothing and exhilarating according to my mood or the mood of the lake. I hasten to add that not only am I not a tax dodger, but that I also have to pay a plump little Swiss tax on top of my massive American taxes which are so high they almost cut off that beautiful view. I feel very nostalgic about America and as soon as I muster the necessary energy I shall return there for good.

Where is the easy chair?

The easy chair is in the other room, in my study. It was a metaphor, after all: the easy chair is the entire hotel, the garden, everything.

Where would you live in America?

I think I would like to live either in California, or in New York, or in Cambridge, Mass. Or in a combination of these three.

Because of your mastery of our language, you are frequently compared with Joseph Conrad.

Well, I'll put it this way. When a boy, I was a voracious reader, as all boy writers seem to be, and between 8 and 14 I used to enjoy tremendously the romantic

productions—romantic in the large sense—of such people as Conan Doyle, Kipling, Joseph Conrad, Chesterton, Oscar Wilde, and other authors who are essentially writers for very young people. But as I have well said somewhere before, I differ from Joseph Conradically. First of all, he had not been writing in his native tongue before he became an English writer, and secondly, I cannot stand today his polished clichés and primitive clashes. He once wrote that he preferred Mrs. Garnett's translation of *Anna Karenin* to the original! This makes one dream—"ça fait rêver" as Flaubert used to say when faced with some abysmal stupidity. Ever since the days when such formidable mediocrities as Galsworthy, Dreiser, a person called Tagore, another called Maxim Gorky, a third called Romain Rolland, used to be accepted as geniuses, I have been perplexed and amused by fabricated notions about so-called "great books". That, for instance, Mann's asinine *Death in Venice* or Pasternak's melodramatic and vilely written *Zhivago* or Faulkner's corncobby chronicles can be considered "masterpieces," or at least what journalists call "great books," is to me an absurd delusion, as when a hypnotized person makes love to a chair. My greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose are, in this order: Joyce's *Ulysses*; Kafka's *Transformation*; Biely's *Petersburg*; and the first half of Proust's fairy tale *In Search of Lost Time*.

What do you think of American writing? I noticed there are no American masterpieces on your list. What do you think of American writing since 1945?

Well, seldom more than two or three really first-rate writers exist simultaneously in a given generation. I think that Salinger and Updike are by far the finest artists in recent years. The sexy, phony type of best seller, the violent, vulgar novel, the novelistic treatment of social or political problems, and, in general, novels consisting mainly of dialogue or social comment—these are absolutely banned from my bedside. And the popular mixture of

pornography and idealistic humbuggery makes me positively vomit.

What do you think of Russian writing since 1945?

Soviet literature . . . Well, in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution, in the twenties and early thirties, one could still distinguish through the dreadful platitudes of Soviet propaganda the dying voice of an earlier culture. The primitive and banal mentality of enforced politics—any politics—can only produce primitive and banal art. This is especially true of the so-called “social realist” and “proletarian” literature sponsored by the Soviet police state. Its jackbooted baboons have gradually exterminated the really talented authors, the special individual, the fragile genius. One of the saddest cases is perhaps that of Osip Mandelshtam—a wonderful poet, the greatest poet among those trying to survive in Russia under the Soviets—whom that brutal and imbecile administration persecuted and finally drove to death in a remote concentration camp. The poems he heroically kept composing until madness eclipsed his limpid gifts are admirable specimens of a human mind at its deepest and highest. Reading them enhances one’s healthy contempt for Soviet ferocity. Tyrants and torturers will never manage to hide their comic stumbles behind their cosmic acrobatics. Contemptuous laughter is all right, but it is not enough in the way of moral relief. And when I read Mandelshtam’s poems composed under the accursed rule of those beasts, I feel a kind of helpless shame, being so free to live and think and write and speak in the free part of the world.—That’s the only time when liberty is bitter.

WALKING IN MONTREUX WITH INTERVIEWER

This is a ginkgo—the sacred tree of China, now rare in the

wild state. The curiously veined leaf resembles a butterfly—which reminds me of a little poem:

The ginkgo leaf, in golden hue, when shed,
A muscat grape,
Is an old-fashioned butterfly, ill-spread,
In shape.

This, in my novel *Pale Fire*, is a short poem by John Shade—by far the greatest of *invented* poets.

PASSING A SWIMMING POOL

I don't mind sharing the sun with sunbathers but I dislike immersing myself in a swimming pool. It is after all only a big tub where other people join you—makes one think of those horrible Japanese communal bathtubs, full of a floating family, or a shoal of businessmen.

DOG NEAR TELEPHONE BOOTH

Must remember the life line of that leash from the meek dog to the talkative lady in that telephone booth. "A long wait"—good legend for an oil painting of the naturalistic school.

BOYS KICKING A BALL IN A GARDEN

Many years have passed since I gathered a soccer ball to my breast. I was an erratic but rather spectacular goalkeeper in my Cambridge University days 45 years ago. After that I played on a German team when I was about 30, and

saved my last game in 1936 when I regained consciousness in the pavilion, knocked out by a kick but still clutching the ball which an impatient teammate was trying to pry out of my arms.

DURING A STROLL NEAR VILLENEUVE

Late September in Central Europe is a bad season for collecting butterflies. This is not Arizona, alas.

In this grassy nook near an old vineyard above the Lake of Geneva, a few fairly fresh females of the very common Meadow Brown still flutter about here and there—lazy old widows. There's one.

Here is a little sky-blue butterfly, also a very common thing, once known as the Clifden Blue in England.

The sun is getting hotter. I enjoy hunting in the buff but I doubt anything interesting can be obtained today. This pleasant lane on the banks of Geneva Lake teems with butterflies in summer. Chapman's Blue and Mann's White, two rather local things, occur not far from here. But the white butterflies we see in this particular glade, on this nice but commonplace autumn day, are the ordinary Whites: the Small White and Green-Veined White.

Ah, a caterpillar. Handle with care. Its golden-brown coat can cause a nasty itch. This handsome worm will become next year a fat, ugly, drab-colored moth.

IN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: WHAT SCENES ONE WOULD LIKE TO HAVE FILMED

Shakespeare in the part of the King's Ghost.

The beheading of Louis the Sixteenth, the drums drown-

ing his speech on the scaffold.

Herman Melville at breakfast, feeding a sardine to his cat.

Poe's wedding. Lewis Carroll's picnics.

The Russians leaving Alaska, delighted with the deal.
Shot of a seal applauding.

6

This interview (published in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. VIII, no. 2, spring 1967) was conducted on September 25, 27, 28, 29, 1966, at Montreux, Switzerland. Mr. Nabokov and his wife have for the last six years lived in an opulent hotel built in 1835, which still retains its nineteenth-century atmosphere. Their suite of rooms is on the sixth floor, overlooking Lake Geneva, and the sounds of the lake are audible through the open doors of their small balcony. Since Mr. Nabokov does not like to talk off the cuff (or “Off the Nabocuff,” as he said) no tape recorder was used. Mr. Nabokov either wrote out his answers to the questions or dictated them to the interviewer; in some instances, notes from the conversation were later recast as formal questions-and-answers. The interviewer was Nabokov’s student at Cornell University in 1954, and the references are to Literature 311–312 (MWF, 12), a course on the Masterpieces of European Fiction (Jane Austen, Gogol, Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Stevenson, Kafka, Joyce, and Proust). Its enrollment had reached four hundred by the time of Nabokov’s resignation in 1959. The footnotes to the interview, except where indicated, are provided by the interviewer, Alfred Appel, Jr.

For years bibliographers and literary journalists didn’t know whether to group you under “Russian” or “American.” Now that

you're living in Switzerland there seems to be complete agreement that you're American. Do you find this kind of distinction at all important regarding your identity as a writer?

I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance. The more distinctive an insect's aspect, the less apt the taxonomist is to glance first of all at the locality label under the pinned specimen in order to decide which of several vaguely described races it should be assigned to. The writer's art is his real passport. His identity should be immediately recognized by a special pattern or unique coloration. His habitat may confirm the correctness of the determination but should not lead to it. Locality labels are known to have been faked by unscrupulous insect dealers. Apart from these considerations I think of myself today as an American writer who has once been a Russian one.

The Russian writers you have translated and written about all precede the so-called "age of realism," which is more celebrated by English and American readers than is the earlier period. Would you say something about your temperamental or artistic affinities with the great writers of the 1830-40 era of masterpieces? Do you see your own work falling under such general rubrics as a tradition of Russian humor?

The question of the affinities I may think I have or not have with nineteenth-century Russian writers is a classificational, not a confessional matter. There is hardly a single Russian major writer of the past whom pigeonholers have not mentioned in connection with me. Pushkin's blood runs through the veins of modern Russian literature as inevitably as Shakespeare's through those of English literature.

Many of the major Russian writers, such as Pushkin, Lermontov, and Bely, have distinguished themselves in both poetry and prose, an uncommon accomplishment in English and American literature. Does this signal fact have anything to do with the special nature of

Russian literary culture, or are there technical or linguistic resources which make this kind of versatility more possible in Russian? And as a writer of both prose and poetry, what distinctions do you make between them?

On the other hand, neither Gogol nor Tolstoy nor Chekhov were distinguished versificators. Moreover, the dividing line between prose and poetry in some of the greatest English or American novels is not easy to draw. I suppose you should have used the term "rhymed poetry" in your question, and then one might answer that Russian rhymes are incomparably more attractive and more abundant than English ones. No wonder a Russian prose writer frequents those beauties, especially in his youth.

Who are the great American writers you most admire?

When I was young I liked Poe, and I still love Melville, whom I did not read as a boy. My feelings towards James are rather complicated. I really dislike him intensely but now and then the figure in the phrase, the turn of the epithet, the screw of an absurd adverb, cause me a kind of electric tingle, as if some current of his was also passing through my own blood. Hawthorne is a splendid writer. Emerson's poetry is delightful.

You have often said that you "don't belong to any club or group," and I wonder if the historical examples of the ways Russian writers have allowed ideology to determine if not destroy their art, culminating in the Socialist Realism of our own time, have not gone a long way in shaping your own skepticism and aversion to didacticism of any kind. Which "historical examples" have you been most conscious of?

My aversion to groups is rather a matter of temperament than the fruit of information and thought. I was born that way and have despised ideological coercion instinctively all my life. Those "historical examples" by the way are not as clear-cut and obvious as you seem to imply. The mystical

didacticism of Gogol or the utilitarian moralism of Tolstoy, or the reactionary journalism of Dostoevski, are of their own poor making and in the long run nobody really takes them seriously.

Would you say something about the controversy surrounding the Chernyshevski biography in The Gift? You have commented on this briefly before, but since its suppression in the thirties expresses such a transcendent irony and seems to justify the need for just such a parody, I think your readers would be most interested, especially since so little is known about the émigré communities, their magazines, and the role of intellectuals in these communities. If you would like to describe something of the writer's relationship to this world, please do.

Everything that can be profitably said about Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev's biography of Chernyshevski has been said by Koncheyev in *The Gift*. I can only add that I devoted as much honest labor to the task of gathering the material for the Chernyshevski chapter as I did to the composing of Shade's poem in *Pale Fire*. As to the suppression of that chapter by the editors of *Sovremennye Zapiski*, it was indeed an unprecedented occurrence, quite out of keeping with their exceptional broad-mindedness, for, generally speaking, in their acceptance or rejection of literary works they were guided exclusively by artistic standards. As to the latter part of your question, the revised Chapter Fourteen in *Speak, Memory* will provide additional information.

Do you have any opinions about the Russian anti-utopian tradition (if it can be called this), from Odoevski's "The Last Suicide" and "A City Without a Name" in Russian Nights to Bryusov's The Republic of the Southern Cross and Zamyatin's We (to name only a few)?

I am indifferent to those works.

Is it fair to say that Invitation to a Beheading and Bend Sinister are cast as mock anti-utopian novels, with their ideological centers removed—the totalitarian state becoming an extreme and fantastic metaphor for the imprisonment of the mind, thus making consciousness, rather than politics, the subject of these novels?

Yes, possibly.

Speaking of ideology, you have often expressed your hostility to Freud, most noticeably in the forewords to your translated novels. Some readers have wondered which of Freud's works or theories you were most offended by and why. The parodies of Freud in Lolita and Pale Fire suggest a wider familiarity with the good doctor than you have ever publicly granted. Would you comment on this?

Oh, I am not up to discussing again that figure of fun. He is not worthy of more attention than I have granted him in my novels and in *Speak, Memory*. Let the credulous and the vulgar continue to believe that all mental woes can be cured by a daily application of old Greek myths to their private parts. I really do not care.

Your contempt for Freud's "standardized symbols" extends to the assumptions of a good many other theorizers. Do you think literary criticism is at all purposeful, and if so, what kind of criticism would you point to? Pale Fire makes it clear what sort you find gratuitous (at best).

My advice to a budding literary critic would be as follows. Learn to distinguish banality. Remember that mediocrity thrives on "ideas." Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories. By all means place the "how" above the "what" but do not let it be confused with the "so what." Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs. Do not drag in Freud at this point. All the rest depends on personal talent.

As a writer, have you ever found criticism instructive—not so much the reviews of your own books, but any general criticism? From your own experiences do you think that an academic and a literary career nourish one another? Since many writers today know no other alternative than a life on campus I'd be very interested in your feelings about this. Do you think that your own work in America was at all shaped by your being part of an academic community?

I find criticism most instructive when an expert proves to me that my facts or my grammar are wrong. An academic career is especially helpful to writers in two ways: 1) easy access to magnificent libraries and 2) long vacations. There is of course the business of teaching, but old professors have young instructors to correct examination papers for them, and young instructors, authors in their own right, are followed by admiring glances along the corridors of Vanity Hall. Otherwise, our greatest rewards, such as the reverberations of our minds in such minds as vibrate responsively in later years, force novelist-teachers to nurse lucidity and honesty of style in their lectures.

What are the possibilities of literary biography?

They are great fun to write, generally less fun to read. Sometimes the thing becomes a kind of double paper chase: first, the biographer pursues his quarry through letters and diaries, and across the bogs of conjecture, and then a rival authority pursues the muddy biographer.

Some critics may find the use of coincidence in a novel arch or contrived. I recall that you yourself at Cornell called Dostoevski's usage of coincidence crude.

But in "real" life they do happen. Last night you were telling us at dinner a very funny story about the use of the title "Doctor" in Germany, and the very next moment, as my loud laughter was subsiding, I heard a person at the

next table saying to her neighbor in clear French tones coming through the tinkling and shuffling sounds of a restaurant—"Of course, you never know with the Germans if 'Doctor' means a dentist or a lawyer." Very often you meet with some person or some event in "real" life that would sound pat in a story. It is not the coincidence in the story that bothers us so much as the coincidence of coincidences in several stories by different writers, as, for instance, the recurrent eavesdropping device in nineteenth-century Russian fiction.

Could you tell us something about your work habits as a writer, and the way you compose your novels. Do you use an outline? Do you have a full sense of where a fiction is heading even while you are in the early stages of composition?

In my twenties and early thirties, I used to write, dipping pen in ink and using a new nib every other day, in exercise books, crossing out, inserting, striking out again, crumpling the page, rewriting every page three or four times, then copying out the novel in a different ink and a neater hand, then revising the whole thing once more, re-copying it with new corrections, and finally dictating it to my wife who has typed out all my stuff. Generally speaking, I am a slow writer, a snail carrying its house at the rate of two hundred pages of final copy per year (one spectacular exception was the Russian original of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the first draft of which I wrote in one fortnight of wonderful excitement and sustained inspiration). In those days and nights I generally followed the order of chapters when writing a novel but even so, from the very first, I relied heavily on mental composition, constructing whole paragraphs in my mind as I walked in the streets or sat in my bath, or lay in bed, although often deleting or rewriting them afterward. In the late thirties, beginning with *The Gift*, and perhaps under the influence of the many notes needed, I switched to another, physically

more practical, method—that of writing with an eraser-capped pencil on index cards. Since I always have at the very start a curiously clear preview of the entire novel before me or above me, I find cards especially convenient when not following the logical sequence of chapters but preparing instead this or that passage at any point of the novel and filling in the gaps in no special order. I am afraid to get mixed up with Plato, whom I do not care for, but I do think that in my case it is true that the entire book, before it is written, seems to be ready ideally in some other, now transparent, now dimming, dimension, and my job is to take down as much of it as I can make out and as precisely as I am humanly able to. The greatest happiness I experience in composing is when I feel I cannot understand, or rather catch myself not understanding (without the presupposition of an already existing creation) how or why that image or structural move or exact formulation of phrase has just come to me. It is sometimes rather amusing to find my readers trying to elucidate in a matter-of-fact way these wild workings of my not very efficient mind.

One often hears from writers talk of how a character takes hold of them and in a sense dictates the course of the action. Has this ever been your experience?

I have never experienced this. What a preposterous experience! Writers who have had it must be very minor or insane. No, the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth. Whether I reproduce it as fully and faithfully as I would wish, is another question. Some of my old works reveal dismal blurrings and blanks.

Pale Fire appears to some readers to be in part a gloss of Plato's myth of the cave, and the constant play of Shades and Shadows

throughout your work suggests a conscious Platonism. Would you care to comment on this possibility?

As I have said I am not particularly fond of Plato, nor would I survive very long under his Germanic regime of militarism and music. I do not think that this cave business has anything to do with my Shade and Shadows.

Since we are mentioning philosophy per se, I wonder if we might talk about the philosophy of language that seems to unfold in your works, and whether or not you have consciously seen the similarities, say, between the language of Zemblan and what Ludwig Wittgenstein had to say about a "private language." Your poet's sense of the limitations of language is startlingly similar to Wittgenstein's remark on the referential basis of language. While you were at Cambridge, did you have much contact with the philosophy faculty?

No contact whatsoever. I am completely ignorant of Wittgenstein's works, and the first time I heard his name must have been in the fifties. In Cambridge I played football and wrote Russian verse.

When in Canto Two John Shade describes himself, "I stand before the window and I pare/My fingernails," you are echoing Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, on the artist who "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." In almost all of your novels, especially in Invitation to a Beheading, Bend Sinister, Pale Fire, and Pnin—but even in Lolita, in the person of the seventh hunter in Quilty's play, and in several other phosphorescent glimmers which are visible to the careful reader—the creator is indeed behind or above his handiwork, but he is not invisible and surely not indifferent. To what extent are you consciously "answering" Joyce in Pale Fire, and what are your feelings about his esthetic stance—or alleged stance, because perhaps you may think that Stephen's remark doesn't apply to Ulysses?

Neither Kinbote nor Shade, nor their maker, is answer-

ing Joyce in *Pale Fire*. Actually, I never liked *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I find it a feeble and garrulous book. The phrase you quote is an unpleasant coincidence.

You have granted that Pierre Delalande influenced you, and I would readily admit that influence-mongering can be reductive and deeply offensive if it tries to deny a writer's originality. But in the instance of yourself and Joyce, it seems to me that you've consciously profited from Joyce's example without imitating him—that you've realized the implications in Ulysses without having had recourse to obviously "Joycean" devices (stream-of-consciousness, the "collage" effects created out of the vast flotsam and jetsam of everyday life). Would you comment on what Joyce has meant to you as a writer, his importance in regard to his liberation and expansion of the novel form?

My first real contact with *Ulysses*, after a leering glimpse in the early twenties, was in the thirties at a time when I was definitely formed as a writer and immune to any literary influence. I studied *Ulysses* seriously only much later, in the fifties, when preparing my Cornell courses. That was the best part of the education I received at Cornell. *Ulysses* towers over the rest of Joyce's writings, and in comparison to its noble originality and unique lucidity of thought and style the unfortunate *Finnegans Wake* is nothing but a formless and dull mass of phony folklore, a cold pudding of a book, a persistent snore in the next room, most aggravating to the insomniac I am. Moreover, I always detested regional literature full of quaint old-timers and imitated pronunciation. *Finnegans Wake's* façade disguises a very conventional and drab tenement house, and only the infrequent snatches of heavenly intonations redeem it from utter insipidity. I know I am going to be excommunicated for this pronouncement.

Although I cannot recall your mentioning the involuted structure of Ulysses when you lectured on Joyce, I do remember your insisting

that the hallucinations in Nighttown are the author's and not Stephen's or Bloom's, which is one step away from a discussion of the involution. This is an aspect of Ulysses almost totally ignored by the Joyce Industry, and an aspect of Joyce which would seem to be of great interest to you. If Joyce's somewhat inconsistent involutions tend to be obscured by the vastness of his structures, it might be said that the structuring of your novels depends on the strategy of involution. Could you comment on this, or compare your sense of Joyce's presence in and above his works with your own intention—that is, Joyce's covert appearances in Ulysses; the whole Shakespeare-paternity theme which ultimately spirals into the idea of the “parentage” of Ulysses itself; Shakespeare's direct address to Joyce in Nighttown (“How my Oldfellow chokit his Thursday-momum,” that being Bloomsday); and Molly's plea to Joyce, “O Jamesy let me up out of this”—all this as against the way the authorial voice—or what you call the “anthropomorphic deity impersonated by me”—again and again appears in your novels, most strikingly at the end.

One of the reasons Bloom cannot be the active party in the Nighttown chapter (and if he is not, then the author is directly dreaming it up for him, and around him, with some “real” episodes inserted here and there) is that Bloom, a wilting male anyway, has been drained of his manhood earlier in the evening and thus would be quite unlikely to indulge in the violent sexual fancies of Nighttown.

Ideally, how should a reader experience or react to “the end” of one of your novels, that moment when the vectors are removed and the fact of the fiction is underscored, the cast dismissed? What common assumptions about literature are you assaulting?

The question is so charmingly phrased that I would love to answer it with equal elegance and eloquence, but I cannot say very much. I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there,

suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artist's Studio* by Van Bock.¹

It may well be a failure of perception, but I've always been unsure of the very last sentences of Lolita, perhaps because the shift in voice at the close of your other books is so clear, but is one supposed to "hear" a different voice when the masked narrator says "And do not pity C. Q. One had to choose between him and H. H., and one wanted H. H. . . ." and so forth? The return to the first person in the next sentence makes me think that the mask has not been lifted, but readers trained on Invitation to a Beheading, among other books, are always looking for the imprint of that "master thumb," to quote Franklin Lane in Pale Fire, "that made the whole involuted, boggling thing one beautiful straight line."

No, I did not mean to introduce a different voice. I did want, however, to convey a constriction of the narrator's sick heart, a warning spasm causing him to abridge names and hasten to conclude his tale before it was too late. I am glad I managed to achieve this remoteness of tone at the end.

Do Franklin Lane's Letters exist? I don't wish to appear like Mr. Goodman in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, but I understand that Franklin Lane did exist.

Frank Lane, his published letters, and the passage cited by Kinbote, certainly exist. Kinbote was rather struck by Lane's handsome melancholy face. And of course "lane" is the last word of Shade's poem. The latter has no significance.

¹ Research has failed to confirm the existence of this alleged "Dutch Master," whose name is only an alphabetical step away from being a significant anagram, a poor relation of Quilty's anagrammatic mistress, "Vivian Darkbloom."

In which of your early works do you think you first begin to face the possibilities that are fully developed in Invitation to a Beheading and reach an apotheosis in the “involute abode” of Pale Fire?

Possibly in *The Eye*, but *Invitation to a Beheading* is on the whole a burst of spontaneous generation.

Are there other writers whose involuted effects you admire? Sterne? Pirandello’s plays?

I never cared for Pirandello. I love Sterne but had not read him in my Russian period.

The Afterword to Lolita is significant, obviously, for many reasons. Is it included in all the translations which, I understand, number about twenty-five?

Yes.

You once told me after a class at Cornell that you’d been unable to read more than one hundred or so pages of Finnegans Wake. As it happens, on page 104 there begins a section very close in spirit to Pale Fire, and I wonder if you’ve ever read this, or seen the similarity. It is the history of all the editions and interpretations of Anna Livia Plurabelle’s Letter (or “Mamafesta,” text included). Among the three pages listing the various titles of ALP’s letter, Joyce includes Try our Taal on a Taub (which we are already doing), and I wondered if you would comment on Swift’s contribution to the literature about the corruption of learning and literature. Is it only a coincidence that Kinbote’s “Foreword” to Pale Fire is dated “Oct. 19,” which is the date of Swift’s death?

I finished *Finnegans Wake* eventually. It has no inner connection with *Pale Fire*. I think it is so nice that the day on which Kinbote committed suicide (and he certainly did after putting the last touches to his edition of the poem) happens to be both the anniversary of Pushkin’s *Lyceum* and that of “poor old man Swift”’s death, which is news to me

(but see variant in note to line 231). In common with Pushkin, I am fascinated by fatidic dates. Moreover, when dating some special event in my novels I often choose a more or less familiar one as a *point de repère* (which helps to check a possible misprint in the proofs), as for instance “April 1” in the diary of Hermann in *Despair*.

Mention of Swift moves me to ask about the genre of Pale Fire; as a “monstrous semblance of a novel,” do you see it in terms of some tradition or form?

The form of *Pale Fire* is specifically, if not generically, new. I would like to take this pleasant opportunity to correct the following misprints in the Putnam edition, 1962, second impression: On page 137, end of note to line 143, “rustic” should be “rusty”. On page 151, “Catskin Week” should be “Catkin Week.” On page 223, the line number in the reference at the end of the first note should be not “550” but “549”. On page 237, top, “For” should be “for”. On page 241, the word “lines” after “*disent-prise*” should be “rhymes”. And on page 294, the comma after “Arnold” should be replaced by an open parenthesis. Thank you.²

Do you make a clear distinction between satire and parody? I ask this because you have so often said you do not wish to be taken as a “moral satirist,” and yet parody is so central to your vision.

Satire is a lesson, parody is a game.

² Since Mr. Nabokov has opened an Errata Department, the following misprints from the Lancer Books paperback edition of *Pale Fire*, 1963, should be noted: on page 17, fifth line from bottom of middle paragraph, “sad” should be “saw.” On page 60, note to lines 47–48, line 21 should be “burst an appendix,” not “and.” On page 111, fourth line of note to line 172, “inscription” is misspelled. On page 158, last sentence of note to line 493, “filfth” should be “filth.” Nabokov’s other books are relatively free from misprints, except for the Popular Library paperback edition of *The Gift*, 1963, whose blemishes are too numerous to mention.

Chapter Ten in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight contains a wonderful description of how parody functions in your own novels. But your sense of what "parody" means seems to stretch the usual definition, as when Cincinnatus in Invitation to a Beheading tells his mother, "You're still only a parody . . . Just like this spider, just like those bars, just like the striking of that clock." All art, then, or at least all attempts at a "realistic" art, would seem to produce a distortion, a "parody." Would you expand on what you mean by "parody" and why, as Fyodor says in The Gift, "The spirit of parody always goes along with genuine poetry"?

When the poet Cincinnatus C., in my dreamiest and most poetical novel, accuses (not quite fairly) his mother of being a parody, he uses the word in its familiar sense of "grotesque imitation." When Fyodor, in *The Gift*, alludes to that "spirit of parody" which plays iridescently around the spray of genuine "serious" poetry, he is referring to parody in the sense of an essentially lighthearted, delicate, mockingbird game, such as Pushkin's parody of Derzhavin in *Exegi Monumentum*.

What is your opinion of Joyce's parodies? Do you see any difference in the artistic effect of scenes such as the maternity hospital and the beach interlude with Gerty Macdowell? Are you familiar with the work of younger American writers who have been influenced by both you and Joyce, such as Thomas Pynchon (a Cornellian, Class of '59, who surely was in Literature 312), and do you have any opinion on the current ascendancy of the so-called parody-novel (John Barth, for instance)?

The literary parodies in the Maternal Hospital chapter are on the whole jejunish. Joyce seems to have been hampered by the general sterilized tone he chose for that chapter, and this somehow dulled and monotonized the inlaid skits. On the other hand, the frilly novelette parodies in the Masturbation scene are highly successful; and the sudden junction of its clichés with the fireworks and tender

sky of real poetry is a feat of genius. I am not familiar with the works of the two other writers you mention.³

Why, in Pale Fire, do you call parody the “last resort of wit”?

It is Kinbote speaking. There are people whom parody upsets.

Are the composition of Lolita and Speak, Memory, two very different books about the spell exerted by the past, at all connected in the way that the translations of The Song of Igor’s Campaign and Eugene Onegin are related to Pale Fire? Had you finished all the notes to Onegin before you began Pale Fire?

Yes, I had finished all my notes to *Onegin* before I began *Pale Fire*. Flaubert speaks in one of his letters, in relation to a certain scene in *Madame Bovary*, about the difficulty of painting *couleur sur couleur*. This in a way is what I tried to do in retwisting my own experience when inventing Kinbote. *Speak, Memory* is strictly autobiographic. There is nothing autobiographic in *Lolita*.

Although self-parody seems to be a vital part of your work, you are a writer who believes passionately in the primacy of the imagination. Yet your novels are filled with little details that seem to have been purposely pulled from your own life, as a reading of Speak, Memory makes clear, not to mention the overriding patterns, such as the lepidopteral motif, which extend through so many of your books. They seem to partake of something other than the involuted voice, to suggest some clearly held idea about the interrelationship between self-knowledge and artistic creation, self-parody and identity. Would you comment on this, and the significance of

³ Mrs. Nabokov, who graded her husband’s examination papers, did remember Pynchon, but only for his “unusual” handwriting: half printing, half script.

autobiographical hints in works of art that are literally not autobiographical?

I would say that imagination is a form of memory. Down, Plato, down, good dog. An image depends on the power of association, and association is supplied and prompted by memory. When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time.

C. P. Snow has complained about the gulf between the "two cultures," the literary and scientific communities. As someone who has bridged this gulf, do you see the sciences and humanities as necessarily opposed? Have your experiences as a scientist influenced your performance as an artist? Is it fanciful to use the vocabulary of physics in describing the structures of some of your novels?

I might have compared myself to a Colossus of Rhodes bestriding the gulf between the thermodynamics of Snow and the Laurentomania of Leavis, had that gulf not been a mere dimple of a ditch that a small frog could straddle. The terms "physics" and "egghead" as used nowadays evoke in me the dreary image of applied science, the knack of an electrician tinkering with bombs and other gadgets. One of those "Two Cultures" is really nothing but utilitarian technology; the other is B-grade novels, ideological fiction, popular art. Who cares if there exists a gap between such "physics" and such "humanities"? Those Eggheads are terrible Philistines. A real good head is not oval but round.

Where, through what window, do lepidoptera come in?

My passion for lepidopterological research, in the field, in the laboratory, in the library, is even more pleasurable

than the study and practice of literature, which is saying a good deal. Lepidopterists are obscure scientists. Not one is mentioned in Webster. But never mind. I have re-worked the classification of various groups of butterflies, have described and figured several species and subspecies. My names for the microscopic organs that I have been the first to see and portray have safely found their way into biological dictionaries (compare this to the wretched entry under "nymphet" in Webster's latest edition). The tactile delights of precise delineation, the silent paradise of the camera lucida, and the precision of poetry in taxonomic description represent the artistic side of the thrill which accumulation of new knowledge, absolutely useless to the layman, gives its first begetter. Science means to me above all natural science. Not the ability to repair a radio set; quite stubby fingers can do that. Apart from this basic consideration, I certainly welcome the free interchange of terminology between any branch of science and any raceme of art. There is no science without fancy, and no art without facts. Aphoristicism is a symptom of arteriosclerosis.

In Pale Fire, Kinbote complains that "The coming of summer represented a problem in optics." The Eye is well-titled, since you plumb these problems throughout your fiction; the apprehension of "reality" is a miracle of vision, and consciousness is virtually an optical instrument in your work. Have you studied the science of optics at all, and would you say something about your own visual sense, and how you feel it has served your fiction?

I am afraid you are quoting this out of context. Kinbote was simply annoyed by the spreading foliage of summer interfering with his Tom-peeping. Otherwise you are right in suggesting that I have good eyes. Doubting Tom should have worn spectacles. It is true, however, that even with the best of visions one must touch things to be *quite* sure of "reality."

You have said that Alain Robbe-Grillet and Jorge Luis Borges are among your favorite contemporary writers. Do you find them to be at all similar? Do you think Robbe-Grillet's novels are as free of "psychology" as he claims?

Robbe-Grillet's claims are preposterous. Those manifestos, those dodoes, die with the dadas. His fiction is magnificently poetical and original, and the shifts of levels, the interpenetration of successive impressions and so forth belong of course to psychology—psychology at its best. Borges is also a man of infinite talent, but his miniature labyrinths and the roomy ones of Robbe-Grillet are quite differently built, and the lighting is not the same.

I recall your humorous remarks at Cornell about two writers experiencing "telepathy" (I believe you were comparing Dickens and Flaubert). You and Borges were both born in 1899 (but so was Ernest Hemingway!). Your Bend Sinister and Borges' story "The Circular Ruins" are conceptually similar, but you do not read Spanish and that story was first translated into English in 1949, two years after Bend Sinister's birth, just as in Borges' "The Secret Miracle," Hladik has created a verse drama uncannily similar to your recently Englished play, The Waltz Invention, which precedes Borges' tale, but which he could not have read in Russian. When were you first aware of Borges' fictions, and have you and he had any kind of association or contact, other than telepathic?

I read a Borges story for the first time three or four years ago. Up till then I had not been aware of his existence, nor do I believe he knew, or indeed knows, anything about me. That is not very grand in the way of telepathy. There are affinities between *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Castle*, but I had not yet read Kafka when I wrote my novel. As to Hemingway, I read him for the first time in the early forties, something about bells, balls, and bulls, and loathed it. Later I read his admirable "The Killers" and the wonderful fish story which I was asked to translate into Russian but could not for some reason or other.

Your first book was a translation of Lewis Carroll into Russian. Do you see any affinities between Carroll's idea of "nonsense" and your bogus or "mongrel" languages in Bend Sinister and Pale Fire?

In common with many other English children (I was an English child) I have been always very fond of Carroll. No, I do not think that his invented language shares any roots with mine. He has a pathetic affinity with H. H. but some odd scruple prevented me from alluding in *Lolita* to his perversion and to those ambiguous photographs he took in dim rooms. He got away with it, as so many other Victorians got away with pederasty and nympholepsy. His were sad scrawny little nymphets, bedraggled and half-undressed, or rather semi-undraped, as if participating in some dusty and dreadful charade.

You have had wide experience as a translator and have made fictive use of translation. What basic problems of existence do you find implicit in the art and act of translation?

There is a certain small Malayan bird of the thrush family which is said to sing only when tormented in an unspeakable way by a specially trained child at the annual Feast of Flowers. There is Casanova making love to a harlot while looking from a window at the nameless tortures inflicted on Damians. These are the visions that sicken me when I read the "poetical" translations from martyred Russian poets by some of my famous contemporaries. A tortured author and a deceived reader, this is the inevitable outcome of arty paraphrase. The only object and justification of translation is the conveying of the most exact information possible and this can be only achieved by a literal translation, with notes.

Mention of translation brings me to one of the Kinbotian problems faced by critics who comment on your Russian novels in translation, but who themselves have no Russian. It has been said that translations such as The Defense and Despair must contain

*many stylistic revisions (certainly the puns), and moreover are in general much richer in language than *Laughter in the Dark*, written at about the same time but, unlike the others, translated in the thirties. Would you comment on this? If the style of *Laughter in the Dark* suggests it should have preceded *Despair*, perhaps it actually was written much earlier: in the BBC interview of four years ago,⁴ you said that you wrote *Laughter in the Dark* when you were twenty-six, which would have been 1925, thus making it your first novel. Did you actually write it this early, or is the reference to age a slip in memory, no doubt caused by the distracting presence of the BBC machinery.*

I touched up details here and there in those novels and reinstated a scene in *Despair*, as the Foreword explains. That “twenty-six” is certainly wrong. It is either a telescoping or I must have been thinking of *Mashenka*, my first novel written in 1925. The Russian original version (*Kamera Obskura*) of *Laughter in the Dark* was written in 1931, three years before *Otchayanie* (*Despair*), and an English translation by Winifred Roy, insufficiently revised by me, appeared in London in 1936. A year later, on the Riviera, I attempted—not quite successfully—to English the thing anew for Bobbs-Merrill, who published it in New York in 1938.

*There is a parenthetical remark in *Despair* about a “vulgar, mediocre Herzog.” Is that a bit of added fun about a recent best seller?*

Herzog means “Duke” in German and I was speaking of a conventional statue of a German Duke in a city square.

*Since the reissued edition of *Laughter in the Dark* is not graced by one of your informative forewords, would you tell us something*

⁴ Peter Duval-Smith, “Vladimir Nabokov on his Life and Work,” *Listener*, LXVIII (Nov. 22, 1962), 856–58. Reprinted as “What Vladimir Nabokov Thinks of his Work,” *Vogue*, CXXI (March 1, 1963), 152–55.

about the book's inception and the circumstances under which you wrote it? Commentators are quick to suggest similarities between Margot and Lolita, but I'm much more interested in the kinship between Axel Rex and Quilty. Would you comment on this, and perhaps on the other perverters of the imagination one finds throughout your work, all of whom seem to share Rex's evil qualities.

Yes, some affinities between Rex and Quilty exist, as they do between Margot and Lo. Actually, of course, Margot was a common young whore, not an unfortunate little Lolita. Anyway I do not think that those recurrent sexual oddities and morbidities are of much interest or importance. My Lolita has been compared to Emmie in *Invitation*, to Mariette in *Bend Sinister*, and even to Colette in *Speak, Memory*—the last is especially ludicrous. But I think it might have been simply English jollity and leg-pulling.⁵

The Doppelgänger motif figures prominently throughout your fiction; in Pale Fire one is tempted to call it a Tripling (at least). Would you say that Laughter in the Dark is your earliest Double fiction?

I do not see any Doubles in *Laughter in the Dark*. A lover can be viewed as the betrayed party's Double but that is pointless.

Would you care to comment on how the Doppelgänger motif has been both used and abused from Poe, Hoffmann, Andersen, Dostoevski, Gogol, Stevenson, and Melville, down to Conrad and Mann? Which Doppelgänger fictions would you single out for praise?

The *Doppelgänger* subject is a frightful bore.

⁵ A reference to Kingsley Amis' review of *Lolita*, "She was a Child and I was a Child," *Spectator*, CCIII (Nov. 6, 1959), p. 636.

What are your feelings about Dostoevski's celebrated The Double; after all, Hermann in Despair considers it as a possible title for his manuscript.

Dostoevski's *The Double* is his best work though an obvious and shameless imitation of Gogol's "Nose." Felix in *Despair* is really a false double.

Speaking of Doubles brings me to Pnin, which in my experience has proved to be one of your most popular novels and at the same time one of your most elusive to those readers who fail to see the relationship of the narrator and the characters (or who fail to even notice the narrator until it's too late). Four of its seven chapters were published in The New Yorker over a considerable period (1953–57), but the all-important last chapter, in which the narrator takes control, is only in the book. I'd be most interested to know if the design of Pnin was complete while the separate sections were being published, or whether your full sense of its possibilities occurred later.

Yes, the design of *Pnin* was complete in my mind when I composed the first chapter which, I believe, in this case was actually the first of the seven I physically set down on paper. Alas, there was to be an additional chapter, between Four (in which, incidentally, the boy at St. Mark's and Pnin both dream of a passage from my drafts of *Pale Fire*, the revolution in Zembla and the escape of the king—that is telepathy for you!) and Five (where Pnin drives a car). In that still uninked chapter, which was beautifully clear in my mind down to the last curve, Pnin recovering in the hospital from a sprained back teaches himself to drive a car in bed by studying a 1935 manual of automobilism found in the hospital library and by manipulating the levers of his cot. Only one of his colleagues visits him there—Professor Blorengé. The chapter ended with Pnin's taking his driver's examination and pedantically arguing with the instructor who has to admit Pnin is right. A combination of chance circumstances in 1956 prevented me from actually writing

that chapter, then other events intervened, and it is only a mummy now.

In a television interview last year, you singled out Bely's St. Petersburg, along with works by Joyce, Kafka, and Proust, as one of the greatest achievements in twentieth-century prose (an endorsement, by the way, which has prompted Grove Press to reissue St. Petersburg, with your statement across the front cover). I greatly admire this novel but, unhappily enough, it is relatively unknown in America. What are its qualities which you most admire? Bely and Joyce are sometimes compared; is the comparison a just one?

Petersburg is a splendid fantasy, but this is a question I plan to answer elsewhere. There does exist some resemblance in manner between *Petersburg* and certain passages in *Ulysses*.

Although I've never seen it discussed as such, the Ableukhov father-son relationship to me constitutes a doubling, making Petersburg one of the most interesting and fantastic permutations of the Doppelgänger theme. Since this kind of doubling (if you would agree it is one) is surely the kind you'd find more congenial, say, than the use Mann makes of the motif in Death in Venice, would you comment on its implications?

Those murky matters have no importance to me as a writer. Philosophically, I am an indivisible monist. Incidentally, your handwriting is very like mine.

Bely lived in Berlin in 1922–23. Did you know him there? You and Joyce lived in Paris at the same time; did you ever meet him?

Once, in 1921 or 1922, at a Berlin restaurant where I was dining with two girls. I happened to be sitting back to back with Andrey Bely who was dining with another writer, Aleksey Tolstoy, at the table behind me. Both writers were at the time frankly pro-Soviet (and on the point of returning

to Russia), and a White Russian, which I still am in that particular sense, would certainly not wish to speak to a *bolshevizan* (fellow traveler). I was acquainted with Aleksey Tolstoy but of course ignored him. As to Joyce, I saw him a few times in Paris in the late thirties. Paul and Lucy Léon, close friends of his, were also old friends of mine. One night they brought him to a French lecture I had been asked to deliver on Pushkin under the auspices of Gabriel Marcel (it was later published in the *Nouvelle revue française*). I had happened to replace at the very last moment a Hungarian woman writer, very famous that winter, author of a best-selling novel, I remember its title, *La Rue du Chat qui Pêche*, but not the lady's name. A number of personal friends of mine, fearing that the sudden illness of the lady and a sudden discourse on Pushkin might result in a suddenly empty house, had done their best to round up the kind of audience they knew I would like to have. The house had, however, a pied aspect since some confusion had occurred among the lady's fans. The Hungarian consul mistook me for her husband and, as I entered, dashed towards me with the froth of condolence on his lips. Some people left as soon as I started to speak. A source of unforgettable consolation was the sight of Joyce sitting, arms folded and glasses glinting, in the midst of the Hungarian football team. Another time my wife and I had dinner with him at the Léons' followed by a long friendly evening of talk. I do not recall one word of it but my wife remembers that Joyce asked about the exact ingredients of *myod*, the Russian "mead," and everybody gave him a different answer. In this connection, there is a marvelous howler in the standard English version of *The Brothers Karamazov*: a supper table at Zosima's abode is described with the translator hilariously misreading "Médoc" (in Russian transliteration in the original text), a French wine greatly appreciated in Russia, as *medok*, the diminutive of *myod* (mead). It would have been fun to recall that I spoke of

this to Joyce but unfortunately I came across this incarnation of *The Karamazovs* some ten years later.

You mentioned Aleksey Tolstoy a moment ago. Would you say something about him?

He was a writer of some talent and has two or three science fiction stories or novels which are memorable. But I wouldn't care to categorize writers, the only category being originality and talent. After all, if we start sticking group labels, we'll have to put *The Tempest* in the SF category, and of course thousands of other valuable works.

Tolstoy was initially an anti-Bolshevik, and his early work precedes the Revolution. Are there any writers totally of the Soviet period whom you admire?

There were a few writers who discovered that if they chose certain plots and certain characters they could get away with it in the political sense, in other words, they wouldn't be told what to write and how to finish the novel. Ilf and Petrov, two wonderfully gifted writers, decided that if they had a rascal adventurer as protagonist, whatever they wrote about his adventures could not be criticized from a political point of view, since a perfect rascal or a madman or a delinquent or any person who was outside Soviet society—in other words, any picaresque character—could not be accused either of being a bad Communist or not being a good Communist. Thus Ilf and Petrov, Zoshchenko, and Olesha managed to publish some absolutely first-rate fiction under that standard of complete independence, since these characters, plots, and themes could not be treated as political ones. Until the early thirties they managed to get away with it. The poets had a parallel system. They thought, and they were right at first, that if they stuck to the garden—to pure poetry, to lyrical imitations, say, of gypsy songs, such as Ilya Selvinski's—that

then they were safe. Zabolotski found a third method of writing, as if the “I” of the poem were a perfect imbecile, crooning in a dream, distorting words, playing with words as a half-insane person would. All these people were enormously gifted but the regime finally caught up with them and they disappeared, one by one, in nameless camps.

By my loose approximation, there remain three novels, some fifty stories, and six plays still in Russian. Are there any plans to translate these? What of The Exploit, written during what seems to have been your most fecund period as a “Russian writer”—would you tell us something, however briefly, about this book?

Not all of that stuff is as good as I thought it was thirty years ago but some of it will probably be published in English by and by. My son is now working on the translation of *The Exploit*. It is the story of a Russian expatriate, a romantic young man of my set and time, a lover of adventure for adventure’s sake, proud flaunter of peril, climber of unnecessary mountains, who merely for the pure thrill of it decides one day to cross illegally into Soviet Russia, and then cross back to exile. Its main theme is the overcoming of fear, the glory and rapture of that victory.

I understand that The Real Life of Sebastian Knight was written in English in 1938. It is very dramatic to think of you bidding farewell to one language and embarking on a new life in another in this way. Why did you decide to write in English at this time, since you obviously could not have known for certain you would emigrate two years later? How much more writing in Russian did you do between Sebastian Knight and your emigration to America in 1940, and once there, did you ever compose in Russian again?

Oh, I did know I would eventually land in America. I switched to English after convincing myself on the strength of my translation of *Despair* that I could use English as a

wistful standby for Russian.⁶ I still feel the pangs of that substitution, they have not been allayed by the Russian poems (my best) that I wrote in New York, or the 1954 Russian version of *Speak, Memory*, or even my recent two-years-long work on the Russian translation of *Lolita*, which will be published in 1967. I wrote *Sebastian Knight* in Paris, 1938. We had that year a charming flat on rue Saigon, between the Etoile and the Bois. It consisted of a huge handsome room (which served as parlor, bedroom, and nursery) with a small kitchen on one side and a large sunny bathroom on the other. This apartment had been some bachelor's delight but was not meant to accommodate a family of three. Evening guests had to be entertained in the kitchen so as not to interfere with my future translator's sleep. And the bathroom doubled as my study. Here is the *Doppelgänger* theme for you.

Do you remember any of those "evening guests"?

I remember Vladislav Hodasevich, the greatest poet of his time, removing his dentures to eat in comfort, just as a grandee would do in the past.

Many people are surprised to learn that you have written seven plays, which is strange, since your novels are filled with "theatrical" effects that are patently unnovelistic. Is it just to say that your frequent allusions to Shakespeare are more than a matter of playful or respectful homage? What do you think of the drama as a form? What are the characteristics of Shakespeare's plays which you find most congenial to your own esthetic?

The verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known, and is immensely superior to the

⁶ In 1936, while living in Berlin, Nabokov translated *Despair* for the English firm John Long, who published it in 1937. The most recent and final edition of *Despair* (New York, 1966) is, as Nabokov explains in its Foreword, a revision of both the early translation and of *Otchayanie* itself.

structure of his plays as plays. With Shakespeare it is the metaphor that is the thing, not the play. My most ambitious venture in the domain of drama is a huge screenplay based on *Lolita*. I wrote it for Kubrick who used only bits and shadows of it for his otherwise excellent film.

When I was your student, you never mentioned the Homeric parallels in discussing Joyce's Ulysses. But you did supply "special information" in introducing many of the masterpieces: a map of Dublin for Ulysses, the arrangement of streets and lodgings in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a diagram of the interior of a railway coach on the Moscow-Petersburg express in Anna Karenin, and a floor plan of the Samsa apartment in The Metamorphosis and an entomological drawing of Gregor. Would you be able to suggest some equivalent for your own readers?

Joyce himself very soon realized with dismay that the harping on those essentially easy and vulgar "Homeric parallelisms" would only distract one's attention from the real beauty of his book. He soon dropped these pretentious chapter titles which already were "explaining" the book to non-readers. In my lectures I tried to give factual data only. A map of three country estates with a winding river and a figure of the butterfly *Parnassius mnemosyne* for a cartographic cherub will be the endpaper in my revised edition of *Speak, Memory*.

Incidentally, one of my colleagues came into my office recently with the breathless news that Gregor is not a cockroach (he had read an article to that effect). I told him I've known that for 12 years, and took out my notes to show him my drawing from what was for one day only Entomology 312. What kind of beetle, by the way, was Gregor?

It was a domed beetle, a scarab beetle with wing-sheaths, and neither Gregor nor his maker realized that when the room was being made by the maid, and the window was open, he could have flown out and escaped and joined the

other happy dung beetles rolling the dung balls on rural paths.

How are you progressing in your novel, The Texture of Time? Since the données for some of your novels seem to be present, however fleetingly, in earlier novels, would it be fair to suggest that Chapter Fourteen of Bend Sinister contains the germ for your latest venture?

In a way, yes; but my *Texture of Time*, now almost half-ready, is only the central rose-web of a much ampler and richer novel, entitled *Ada*, about passionate, hopeless, rapturous sunset love, with swallows darting beyond the stained window and that radiant shiver . . .

Speaking of données: At the end of Pale Fire, Kinbote says of Shade and his poem, "I even suggested to him a good title—the title of the book in me whose pages he was to cut: Solus Rex; instead of which I saw Pale Fire, which meant to me nothing." In 1940 Sovremennye Zapiski published a long section from your "unfinished" novel, Solus Rex, under that title. Does Pale Fire represent the "cutting" of its pages? What is the relationship between it, the other untranslated fragment from Solus Rex ("Ultima Thule," published in Novyy Journal, New York, 1942) and Pale Fire?

My *Solus Rex* might have disappointed Kinbote less than Shade's poem. The two countries, that of the Lone King and the Zembla land, belong to the same biological zone. Their subarctic bogs have much the same butterflies and berries. A sad and distant kingdom seems to have haunted my poetry and fiction since the twenties. It is not associated with my personal past. Unlike Northern Russia, both Zembla and Ultima Thule are mountainous, and their languages are of a phony Scandinavian type. If a cruel prankster kidnapped Kinbote and placed him, blindfolded, in the Ultima Thule countryside, Kinbote would not know—at least not immediately—by the sap smells and

bird calls that he was not back in Zembla, but he would be tolerably sure that he was not on the banks of the Neva.

This may be like asking a father to publicly declare which of his children is most loved, but do you have one novel towards which you feel the most affection, which you esteem over all others?

The most affection, *Lolita*; the greatest esteem, *Priglasenie na Kazn'*.⁷

*And as a closing question, sir, may I return to Pale Fire: where, please, are the crown jewels bidden?*⁸

In the ruins, sir, of some old barracks near Kobaltana (q.v.); but do not tell it to the Russians.

⁷ *Invitation to a Beheading*

⁸ One hesitates to explain a joke, but readers unfamiliar with *Pale Fire* should be informed that the hiding place of the Zemblan crown jewels is never revealed in the text, and the Index entry under "crown jewels," to which the reader must now refer, is less than helpful. "Kobaltana" is also in the Index.

7

Most of the questions were submitted by Herbert Gold, during a visit to Montreux in September, 1966. The rest (asterisked) were mailed to me by George A. Plimpton. The combined set appeared in *The Paris Review* of October, 1967.

Good morning. Let me ask forty-odd questions.

Good morning. I am ready.

Your sense of the immorality of the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita is very strong. In Hollywood and New York, however, relationships are frequent between men of forty and girls very little older than Lolita. They marry—to no particular public outrage; rather, public cooing.

No, it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert–Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert’s sense. *He* cares, I do not. *I* do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere. And, anyway, cases of men in their forties marrying girls in their teens or early twenties have no bearing on Lolita whatever. Humbert was fond of “little girls”—not simply “young girls.” Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and “sex kittens.” Lolita was twelve, not eighteen, when Humbert met her. You may remember that by the time she is fourteen, he refers to her as his “aging mistress.”

One critic has said about you that "his feelings are like no one else's." Does this make sense to you? Or does it mean that you know your feelings better than others know theirs? Or that you have discovered yourself at other levels? Or simply that your history is unique?

I do not recall that article; but if a critic makes such a statement, it must surely mean that he has explored the feelings of literally millions of people, in at least three countries, before reaching his conclusion. If so, I am a rare fowl indeed. If, on the other hand, he has merely limited himself to quizzing members of his family or club, his statement cannot be discussed seriously.

Another critic has written that your "worlds are static. They may become tense with obsession, but they do not break apart like the worlds of everyday reality." Do you agree? Is there a static quality in your view of things?

Whose "reality"? "Everyday" where? Let me suggest that the very term "everyday reality" is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known. I suspect you have invented that expert on "everyday reality." Neither exists.

He does (names him). A third critic has said that you "diminish" your characters "to the point where they become ciphers in a cosmic farce." I disagree; Humbert, while comic, retains a touching and insistent quality—that of the spoiled artist.

I would put it differently: Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear "touching." That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl. Besides, how can I "diminish" to the level of ciphers, et cetera, characters that I have invented myself? One can "diminish" a biographee, but not an eidolon.

***E. M. Forster speaks of his major characters sometimes taking over and dictating the course of his novels. Has this ever been a problem for you, or are you in complete command?*

My knowledge of Mr. Forster's works is limited to one novel which I dislike; and anyway it was not he who fathered that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand; it is as old as the quills, although of course one sympathizes with *his* people if they try to wriggle out of that trip to India or wherever he takes them. My characters are galley slaves.

***Clarence Brown of Princeton has pointed out striking similarities in your work. He refers to you as "extremely repetitious" and that in wildly different ways you are in essence saying the same thing. He speaks of fate being the "muse of Nabokov." Are you consciously aware of "repeating yourself," or to put it another way, that you strive for a conscious unity to your shelf of books?*

I do not think I have seen Clarence Brown's essay, but he may have something there. Derivative writers seem versatile because they imitate many others, past and present. Artistic originality has only its own self to copy.

***Do you think literary criticism is at all purposeful? Either in general, or specifically about your own books? Is it ever instructive?*

The purpose of a critique is to say something about a book the critic has or has not read. Criticism can be instructive in the sense that it gives readers, including the author of the book, some information about the critic's intelligence, or honesty, or both.

***And the function of the editor? Has one ever had literary advice to offer?*

By "editor" I suppose you mean proofreader. Among these I have known limpid creatures of limitless tact and tenderness who would discuss with me a semicolon as if it

were a point of honor—which, indeed, a point of art often is. But I have also come across a few pompous avuncular brutes who would attempt to “make suggestions” which I countered with a thunderous “stet!”

Are you a lepidopterist, stalking your victims? If so, doesn't your laughter startle them?

On the contrary, it lulls them into the state of torpid security which an insect experiences when mimicking a dead leaf. Though by no means an avid reader of reviews dealing with my own stuff, I happen to remember the essay by a young lady who attempted to find entomological symbols in my fiction. The essay might have been amusing had she known something about Lepidoptera. Alas, she revealed complete ignorance and the muddle of terms she employed proved to be only jarring and absurd.

How would you define your alienation from the so-called “White Russian” refugees?

Well, historically I am a “White Russian” myself, since all Russians who left Russia as my family did in the first years of the Bolshevist tyranny because of their opposition to it were and remained “White Russians” in the large sense. But these refugees were split into as many social fractions and political factions as the entire nation had been before the Bolshevist coup. I do not mix with “black-hundred” White Russians and do not mix with the so-called “bolshevizans,” that is “pinks.” On the other hand, I have friends among intellectual Constitutional Monarchists as well as among intellectual Social Revolutionaries. My father was an old-fashioned liberal, and I do not mind being labeled an old-fashioned liberal too.

How would you define your alienation from present-day Russia?

As a deep distrust of the phony thaw now advertised. As a constant awareness of unredeemable iniquities. As a

complete indifference to all that moves a patriotic Sovetski man of today. As the keen satisfaction of having discerned as early as 1918 (nineteen eighteen) the *meshchantsvo* (petty bourgeois smugness, Philistine essence) of Leninism.

***How do you now regard the poets Blok and Mandelshtam and others who were writing in the days before you left Russia?*

I read them in my boyhood, more than a half-century ago. Ever since that time I have remained passionately fond of Blok's lyrics. His long pieces are weak, and the famous *The Twelve* is dreadful, self-consciously couched in a phony "primitive" tone, with a pink cardboard Jesus Christ glued on at the end. As to Mandelshtam, I also knew him by heart, but he gave me a less fervent pleasure. Today, through the prism of a tragic fate, his poetry seems greater than it actually is. I note incidentally that professors of literature still assign these two poets to different schools. There is only one school: that of talent.

I know your work has been read and is attacked in the Soviet Union. How would you feel about a Soviet edition of your work?

Oh, they are welcome to my work. As a matter of fact, the Editions Victor are bringing out my *Invitation to a Beheading* in a reprint of the original Russian of 1935, and a New York publisher (Phaedra) is printing my Russian translation of *Lolita*. I am sure the Soviet Government will be happy to admit officially a novel that seems to contain a prophecy of Hitler's regime, and a novel that is thought to condemn bitterly the American system of motels.

Have you ever had contact with Soviet citizens? Of what sort?

I have practically no contact with them though I did once agree, in the early thirties or late twenties, to meet—out of sheer curiosity—an agent from Bolshevist Russia who was trying hard to get émigré writers and artists to return to the

fold. He had a double name, Tarasov something, and had written a novelette entitled *Chocolate*, and I thought I might have some sport with him. I asked him would I be permitted to write freely and would I be able to leave Russia if I did not like it there. He said that I would be so busy liking it there that I would have no time to dream of going abroad again. I would, he said, be perfectly free to choose any of the many themes Soviet Russia bountifully allows a writer to use, such as farms, factories, forests in Fakistan—oh, lots of fascinating subjects. I said farms, et cetera, bored me, and my wretched seducer soon gave up. He had better luck with the composer Prokofiev.

Do you consider yourself an American?

Yes, I do. I am as American as April in Arizona. The flora, the fauna, the air of the Western states are my links with Asiatic and Arctic Russia. Of course, I owe too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally involved in, say, American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane; but I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers. Crude criticism of American affairs offends and distresses me. In home politics I am strongly anti-segregationist. In foreign policy, I am definitely on the government's side. And when in doubt, I always follow the simple method of choosing that line of conduct which may be the most displeasing to the Reds and the Russells.

Is there a community of which you consider yourself a part?

Not really. I can mentally collect quite a large number of individuals whom I am fond of but they would form a very disparate and discordant group if gathered in real life, on a real island. Otherwise, I would say that I am fairly comfortable in the company of American intellectuals who have read my books.

*** What is your opinion of the academic world as a milieu for the creative writer? Could you speak specifically of the value or detriment of your teaching at Cornell?*

A first-rate college library with a comfortable campus around it is a fine milieu for a writer. There is of course the problem of educating the young. I remember how once, between terms, not at Cornell, a student brought a transistor set with him into the reading room. He managed to state that 1) he was playing "classical" music; that 2) he was doing it "softly"; and that 3) "there were not many readers around in summer." I was there, a one-man multitude.

Would you describe your relationship with the contemporary literary community? With Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, your magazine editors and book publishers?

The only time I ever collaborated with any writer was when I translated with Edmund Wilson Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* for the *New Republic* twenty-five years ago, a rather paradoxical recollection in view of his making such a fool of himself last year when he had the audacity of questioning my understanding of *Eugene Onegin*. Mary McCarthy, on the other hand, has been very kind to me recently in the same *New Republic*, although I do think she added quite a bit of her own angelica to the pale fire of Kinbote's plum pudding. I prefer not to mention here my relationship with Girodias. I have answered in *Evergreen* his scurvy article in the Olympia anthology. Otherwise, I am on excellent terms with all my publishers. My warm friendship with Catharine White and Bill Maxwell of *The New Yorker* is something the most arrogant author cannot evoke without gratitude and delight.

*** Could you say something of your work habits? Do you write to a preplanned chart? Do you jump from one section to another, or do you move from the beginning through to the end?*

The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the

gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index cards until the novel is done. My schedule is flexible but I am rather particular about my instruments: lined Bristol cards and well-sharpened, not too hard, pencils capped with erasers.

Is there a particular picture of the world which you wish to develop? The past is very present for you, even in a novel of the "future," such as Bend Sinister. Are you a "nostalgist"? In what time would you prefer to live?

In the coming days of silent planes and graceful aircycles, and cloudless silvery skies, and a universal system of padded underground roads to which trucks shall be relegated like Morlocks. As to the past, I would not mind retrieving from various corners of spacetime certain lost comforts, such as baggy trousers and long, deep bathtubs.

You know, you do not have to answer all my Kinbote-like questions.

It would never do to start skipping the tricky ones. Let us continue.

Besides writing novels, what do you, or would you, like most to do?

Oh, hunting butterflies, of course, and studying them. The pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside in Iran or Peru. It is not improbable that had there been no revolution in Russia, I would have devoted myself entirely to lepidopterology and never written any novels at all.

What is most characteristic of poshlust in contemporary writing? Are there temptations for you in the sin of poshlust? Have you ever fallen?

"Poshlust," or in a better transliteration *poshlost*, has

many nuances and evidently I have not described them clearly enough in my little book on Gogol, if you think one can ask anybody if he is tempted by *poshlost*. Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic and dishonest pseudo-literature—these are obvious examples. Now, if we want to pin down *poshlost* in contemporary writing we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know. *Poshlost* speaks in such concepts as “America is no better than Russia” or “We all share in Germany’s guilt.” The flowers of *poshlost* bloom in such phrases and terms as “the moment of truth,” “charisma,” “existential” (used seriously), “dialogue” (as applied to political talks between nations), and “vocabulary” (as applied to a dauber). Listing in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlost*. Belonging to a very select club (which sports *one* Jewish name—that of the treasurer) is genteel *poshlost*. Hack reviews are frequently *poshlost*, but it also lurks in certain highbrow essays. *Poshlost* calls Mr. Blank a great poet, and Mr. Bluff a great novelist. One of *poshlost*’s favorite breeding places has always been the Art Exhibition; there it is produced by so-called sculptors working with the tools of wreckers, building crankshaft cretins of stainless steel, zen stereos, polystyrene stink-birds, objects *trouvés* in latrines, cannon balls, canned balls. There we admire the *gabinetti* wallpatterns of so-called abstract artists, Freudian surrealism, roric smudges, and Rorschach blots—all of it as corny in its own right as the academic “September Morns” and “Florentine Flowergirls” of half a century ago. The list is long, and, of course, everybody has his *bête noire*, his black pet, in the series. Mine is that airline ad: the snack served by an obsequious wench to a young couple—she eyeing ecstatically the cucumber canapé, he admiring wistfully the hostess. And, of course, *Death in Venice*. You see the range.

Are there contemporary writers you follow with great pleasure?

There are several such writers, but I shall not name them. Anonymous pleasure hurts nobody.

Do you follow some with great pain?

No. Many accepted authors simply do not exist for me. Their names are engraved on empty graves, their books are dummies, they are complete nonentities insofar as my taste in reading is concerned. Brecht, Faulkner, Camus, many others, mean absolutely nothing to me, and I must fight a suspicion of conspiracy against my brain when I see blandly accepted as "great literature" by critics and fellow authors Lady Chatterley's copulations or the pretentious nonsense of Mr. Pound, that total fake. I note he has replaced Dr. Schweitzer in some homes.

***As an admirer of Borges and Joyce you seem to share their pleasure in teasing the reader with tricks and puns and puzzles. What do you think the relationship should be between reader and author?*

I do not recollect any puns in Borges but then I read him only in translation. Anyway, his delicate little tales and miniature Minotaurs have nothing in common with Joyce's great machines. Nor do I find many puzzles in that most lucid of novels, *Ulysses*. On the other hand, I detest *Finnegans Wake* in which a cancerous growth of fancy word-tissue hardly redeems the dreadful joviality of the folklore and the easy, too easy, allegory.

What have you learned from Joyce?

Nothing.

Oh, come.

James Joyce has not influenced me in any manner whatsoever. My first brief contact with *Ulysses* was around 1920 at Cambridge University, when a friend, Peter Mro-

zovski, who had brought a copy from Paris, chanced to read to me, as he stomped up and down my digs, one or two spicy passages from Molly's monologue, which, *entre nous soit dit*, is the weakest chapter in the book. Only fifteen years later, when I was already well formed as a writer and reluctant to learn or unlearn anything, I read *Ulysses* and liked it enormously. I am indifferent to *Finnegans Wake* as I am to all regional literature written in dialect—even if it be the dialect of genius.

Aren't you doing a book about James Joyce?

But not only about him. What I intend to do is publish a number of twenty-page essays on several works—*Ulysses*, *Madame Bovary*, Kafka's *Transformation*, *Don Quixote*, and others—all based on my Cornell and Harvard lectures. I remember with delight tearing apart *Don Quixote*, a cruel and crude old book, before six hundred students in Memorial Hall, much to the horror and embarrassment of some of my more conservative colleagues.

What about other influences? Pushkin?

In a way—no more than, say, Tolstoy or Turgenev were influenced by the pride and purity of Pushkin's art.

Gogol?

I was careful *not* to learn anything from him. As a teacher, he is dubious and dangerous. At his worst, as in his Ukrainian stuff, he is a worthless writer; at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable.

Anyone else?

H. G. Wells, a great artist, was my favorite writer when I was a boy. *The Passionate Friends*, *Ann Veronica*, *The Time Machine*, *The Country of the Blind*, all these stories are far better than anything Bennett, or Conrad, or, in fact, any of

Wells' contemporaries would produce. His sociological cogitations can be safely ignored, of course, but his romances and fantasias are superb. There was an awful moment at dinner in our St. Petersburg house one night, when Zinaïda Vengerov, his translator, informed Wells, with a toss of her head: "You know, *my* favorite work of yours is *The Lost World*." "She means the war the Martians lost," said my father quickly.

Did you learn from your students at Cornell? Was the experience purely a financial one? Did teaching teach you anything valuable?

My method of teaching precluded genuine contact with my students. At best, they regurgitated a few bits of my brain during examinations. Every lecture I delivered had been carefully, lovingly handwritten and typed out, and I leisurely read it out in class, sometimes stopping to rewrite a sentence and sometimes repeating a paragraph—a mnemonic prod which, however, seldom provoked any change in the rhythm of wrists taking it down. I welcomed the few shorthand experts in my audience, hoping they would communicate the information they stored to their less fortunate comrades. Vainly I tried to replace my appearances at the lectern by taped records to be played over the college radio. On the other hand, I deeply enjoyed the chuckle of appreciation in this or that warm spot of the lecture hall at this or that point of my lecture. My best reward comes from those former students of mine who ten or fifteen years later write to me to say that they now understand what I wanted of them when I taught them to visualize Emma Bovary's mistranslated hairdo or the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household or the two homosexuals in *Anna Karenin*. I do not know if I learned anything from teaching but I know I amassed an invaluable amount of exciting information in analyzing a dozen novels for my students. My salary as you happen to know was not exactly a princely one.

Is there anything you would care to say about the collaboration your wife has given you?

She presided as adviser and judge over the making of my first fiction in the early twenties. I have read to her all my stories and novels at least twice. She has reread them all when typing them and correcting proofs and checking translations into several languages. One day in 1950, at Ithaca, New York, she was responsible for stopping me and urging delay and second thoughts as, beset with technical difficulties and doubts, I was carrying the first chapters of *Lolita* to the garden incinerator.

What is your relation to the translations of your books?

In the case of languages my wife and I know or can read—English, Russian, French, and to a certain extent German and Italian—the system is a strict checking of every sentence. In the case of Japanese or Turkish versions, I try not to imagine the disasters that probably bespatter every page.

What are your plans for future work?

I am writing a new novel but of this I cannot speak. Another project I have been nursing for some time is the publication of the complete screenplay of *Lolita* that I made for Kubrick. Although there are just enough borrowings from it in his version to justify my legal position as author of the script, the film is only a blurred skimpy glimpse of the marvelous picture I imagined and set down scene by scene during the six months I worked in a Los Angeles villa. I do not wish to imply that Kubrick's film is mediocre; in its own right, it is first-rate, but it is not what I wrote. A tinge of *poshlost* is often given by the cinema to the novel it distorts and coarsens in its crooked glass. Kubrick, I think, avoided this fault in his version, but I shall never understand why he did not follow my directions

and dreams. It is a great pity; but at least I shall be able to have people read my *Lolita* play in its original form.

If you had the choice of one and only one book by which you would be remembered, which one would it be?

The one I am writing or rather dreaming of writing. Actually, I shall be remembered by *Lolita* and my work on *Eugene Onegin*.

Do you feel you have any conspicuous or secret flaw as a writer?

The absence of a natural vocabulary. An odd thing to confess, but true. Of the two instruments in my possession, one—my native tongue—I can no longer use, and this not only because I lack a Russian audience, but also because the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium has faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940. My English, this second instrument I have always had, is however a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop. An old Rolls-Royce is not always preferable to a plain Jeep.

What do you think about the contemporary competitive ranking of writers?

Yes, I have noticed that in this respect our professional book reviewers are veritable bookmakers. Who's in, who's out, and where are the snows of yesteryear. All very amusing. I am a little sorry to be left out. Nobody can decide if I am a middle-aged American writer or an old Russian writer—or an ageless international freak.

What is your great regret in your career?

That I did not come earlier to America. I would have

liked to have lived in New York in the thirties. Had my Russian novels been translated then, they might have provided a shock and a lesson for pro-Soviet enthusiasts.

Are there significant disadvantages to your present fame?

Lolita is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name.

8

On February 17, 1968, Martin Esslin came to see me at my hotel in Montreux with the object of conducting an interview for *The New York Times Book Review*. The following letter awaited him downstairs.

“Welcome! I have devoted a lot of pleasurable time to answering in writing the questions sent to me by your London office. I have done so in a concise, stylish, printable form. Could I please ask you to have my answers appear in *The New York Times Book Review* the way they are prepared here? (Except that you may want to interrupt the longer answers by several inserted questions). That convenient method has been used to mutual satisfaction in interviews with *Playboy*, *The Paris Review*, *Wisconsin Studies*, *Le Monde*, *La Tribune de Genève*, etc. Furthermore, I like to see the proofs for checking last-minute misprints or possible little flaws of fact (dates, places). Being an unusually muddled speaker (a poor relative of the writer) I would like the stuff I prepared in typescript to be presented as direct speech on my part, whilst other statements which I may stammer out in the course of our chats, and the gist of which you might want to incorporate in The Profile, should be used, please, obliquely or paraphrastically, without any quotes. Naturally, it is for you to decide whether the background material should be kept separate in its published form from the question-and-answer section.

I am leaving the attached material with the concierge

because I think you might want to peruse it before we meet. I am very much looking forward to seeing you. Please give me a ring when you are ready.”

The text given below is that of the typescript. The interview appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* on May 12, 1968.

How does VN live and relax?

A very old Russian friend of ours, now dwelling in Paris, remarked recently when she was here, that one night, forty years ago, in the course of a little quiz at one of her literary parties in Berlin, I, being asked where I would like to live, answered, “In a large comfortable hotel.” That is exactly what my wife and I are doing now. About every other year she and I fly (she) or sail (she and I), back to our country of adoption but I must confess that I am a very sluggish traveler unless butterfly hunting is involved. For that purpose we usually go to Italy where my son and translator (from Russian into English) lives; the knowledge of Italian he has acquired in the course of his main career (opera singing) assists him, incidentally, in checking some of the Italian translations of my stuff. My own Italian is limited to “*avanti*” and “*prego*”.

After waking up between six and seven in the morning, I write till ten-thirty, generally at a lectern which faces a bright corner of the room instead of the bright audiences of my professorial days. The first half-hour of relaxation is breakfast with my wife, around eight-thirty, and the creaming of our mail. One kind of letter that goes into the wastepaper basket at once, with its enclosed stamped envelope and my picture, is the one from the person who tells me he has a large collection of autographs (Somerset Maugham, Abu Abdul, Karen Korona, Charles Dodgson, Jr., etc.) and would like to add my name, which he misspells. Around eleven, I soak for twenty minutes in a hot bath, with a sponge on my head and a wordsman’s worry in it, encroaching, alas, upon the nirvana. A stroll

with my wife along the lake is followed by a frugal lunch and a two-hour nap after which I resume my work until dinner at seven. An American friend gave us a Scrabble set in Cyrillic alphabet, manufactured in Newtown, Conn.; so we play Russian *skrebl* for an hour or two after dinner. Then I read in bed—periodicals or one of the novels that proud publishers optimistically send me. Between eleven and midnight begins my usual fight with insomnia. Such are my habits in the cold season. Summers I spend in the pursuit of lepidoptera on flowery slopes and mountain scree; and, of course, after my daily hike of fifteen miles or more, I sleep even worse than in winter. My last resort in this business of relaxation is the composing of chess problems. The recent publication of two of them (in *The Sunday Times* and *The Evening News* of London) gave me more pleasure, I think, than the printing of my first poems half a century ago in St. Petersburg.

VN's social circle?

The tufted ducks and crested grebes of Geneva Lake. Some of the nice people in my new novel. My sister Elena in Geneva. A few friends in Lausanne and Vevey. A steady stream of brilliant American intellectuals visiting me in the riparian solitude of a beautifully reflected sunset. A Mr. Van Veen who travels down from his mountain chalet every other day to meet a dark lady, whose name I cannot divulge, on a street corner that I glimpse from my mammoth-tusk tower. Who else? A Mr. Vivian Badlook.

VN's feelings about his work?

My feelings about my work are, on the whole, not unfriendly. Boundless modesty and what people call "humility" are virtues scarcely conducive to one's complacently dwelling upon one's own work—particularly when one lacks them. I see it segmented into four stages. First comes meditation (including the accumulation of seemingly hap-

hazard notes, the secret arrowheads of research); then the actual writing, and rewriting, on special index cards that my stationer orders for me: "special" because those you buy here come lined on both sides, and if, in the process of writing, a blast of inspiration sweeps a card onto the floor, and you pick it up without looking, and go on writing, it may happen—it has happened—that you fill in its underside, numbering it, say, 107, and then cannot find your 103 which hides on the side, used before. When the fair copy on cards is ready, my wife reads it, checking it for legibility and spelling, and has it transferred onto pages by a typist who knows English; the reading of galleys is a further part of that third stage. After the book is out, foreign rights come into play. I am trilingual, in the proper sense of writing, and not only speaking, three languages (in that sense practically all the writers I personally know or knew in America, including a babel of paraphrasts, are strictly monolingualists). *Lolita* I have translated myself in Russian (recently published in New York by Phaedra, Inc.); but otherwise I am able to control and correct only the French translations of my novels. That process entails a good deal of wrestling with boobos and boners, but on the other hand allows me to reach my fourth, and final, stage—that of rereading my own book a few months after the original printing. What judgment do I then pronounce? Am I still satisfied with my work? Does the afterglow of achievement correspond to the foreglow of conception? It should and it does.

VN's opinions: on the modern world; on contemporary politics; on contemporary writers; on drug addicts who might consider Lolita "square"?

I doubt if we can postulate the objective existence of a "modern world" on which an artist should have any definite and important opinion. It has been tried, of course, and even carried to extravagant lengths. A hundred years ago, in Russia, the most eloquent and influential reviewers were

left-wing, radical, utilitarian, political critics, who demanded that Russian novelists and poets portray and sift the modern scene. In those distant times, in that remote country, a typical critic would insist that a literary artist be a "reporter on the topics of the day," a social commentator, a class-war correspondent. That was half a century before the Bolshevist police not only revived the dismal so-called progressive (really, regressive) trend characteristic of the eighteen sixties and seventies, but, as we all know, enforced it. In the old days, to be sure, great lyrical poets or the incomparable prose artist who composed *Anna Karenin* (which should be transliterated without the closing "a"—she was not a ballerina) could cheerfully ignore the left-wing progressive Philistines who requested Tyutchev or Tolstoy to mirror politico-social soapbox gesticulations instead of dwelling on an aristocratic love affair or the beauties of nature. The dreary principles once voiced in the reign of Alexander the Second and their subsequent sinister transmutation into the decrees of gloomy police states (Kosygin's dour face expresses that gloom far better than Stalin's dashing mustache) come to my mind whenever I hear today retro-progressive book reviewers in America and England plead for a little more social comment, a little less artistic whimsy. The accepted notion of a "modern world" continuously flowing around us belongs to the same type of abstraction as say, the "quaternary period" of paleontology. What I feel to be the real modern world is the world the artist creates, his own mirage, which becomes a new *mir* ("world" in Russian) by the very act of his shedding, as it were, the age he lives in. My mirage is produced in my private desert, an arid but ardent place, with the sign No Caravans Allowed on the trunk of a lone palm. Of course, good minds do exist whose caravans of general ideas lead somewhere—to curious bazaars, to photogenic temples; but an independent novelist cannot derive much true benefit from tagging along.

I would also want to establish first a specific definition of

the term politics, and that might mean dipping again in the remote past. Let me simplify matters by saying that in my parlor politics as well as in open-air statements (when subduing, for instance, a glib foreigner who is always glad to join our domestic demonstrators in attacking America), I content myself with remarking that what is bad for the Reds is good for me. I will abstain from details (they might lead to a veritable slalom of qualificatory parentheses), adding merely that I do not have any neatly limited political views or rather that such views as I have shade off into a vague old-fashioned liberalism. Much less vaguely—quite adamantly, or even adamantly—I am aware of a central core of spirit in me that flashes and jeers at the brutal farce of totalitarian states, such as Russia, and her embarrassing tumors, such as China. A feature of my inner prospect is the absolute abyss yawning between the barbed-wire tangle of police states and the spacious freedom of thought we enjoy in America and Western Europe.

I am bored by writers who join the social-comment racket. I despise the corny Philistine fad of flaunting four-letter words. I also refuse to find merit in a novel just because it is by a brave Black in Africa or a brave White in Russia—or by any representative of any single group in America. Frankly, a national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involuntarily prejudices me against a novel, making it harder for me to peel the offered fruit so as to get at the nectar of possible talent. I could name, but will not, a number of modern artists whom I read purely for pleasure, and not for edification. I find comic the amalgamation of certain writers under a common label of, say, “Cape Codpiece Peace Resistance” or “Welsh Working-Upperclass Rehabilitation” or “New Hairwave School.” Incidentally, I frequently hear the distant whining of people who complain in print that I dislike the writers whom *they* venerate such as Faulkner, Mann, Camus, Dreiser, and of course Dostoevski. But I can assure them that because I detest certain writers I am not impairing the

well-being of the plaintiffs in whom the images of my victims happen to form organic galaxies of esteem. I can prove, indeed, that the works of those authors really exist independently and separately from the organs of affection throbbing in the systems of irate strangers.

Drug addicts, especially young ones, are conformists flocking together in sticky groups, and I do not write for groups, nor approve of group therapy (the big scene in the Freudian Farce); as I have said often enough, I write for myself in multiply, a not unfamiliar phenomenon on the horizons of shimmering deserts. Young dunces who turn to drugs cannot read *Lolita*, or any of my books; some in fact cannot read at all. Let me also observe that the term "square" already dates as a slang word, for nothing dates quicker than radical youth, nor is there anything more Philistine, more bourgeois, more ovine than this business of drug duncery. Half a century ago, a similar fashion among the smart set of St. Petersburg was cocaine sniffing combined with phony orientalities. The better and brighter minds of my young American readers are far removed from those juvenile fads and faddists. I also used to know in the past a Communist agent who got so involved in trying to wreck anti-Bolshevist groups by distributing drugs among them that he became an addict himself and lapsed into a dreamy state of commendable metempsychic sloth. He must be grazing today on some grassy slope in Tibet if he has not yet lined the coat of the fortunate shepherd.

9

On September 3, 1968, Nicholas Garnham interviewed me at the Montreux Palace for *Release*, BBC-2. The interview was faithfully reproduced in *The Listener*, October 10, of the same year: a neat and quick job. I have used its title for the present collection.

You have said your novels have 'no social purpose, no moral message.' What is the function of your novels in particular and of the novel in general?

One of the functions of all my novels is to prove that the novel in general does not exist. The book I make is a subjective and specific affair. I have no purpose at all when composing my stuff except to compose it. I work hard, I work long, on a body of words until it grants me complete possession and pleasure. If the reader has to work in his turn—so much the better. Art is difficult. Easy art is what you see at modern exhibitions of things and doodles.

In your prefaces you constantly mock Freud, the Viennese witch-doctor.

Why should I tolerate a perfect stranger at the bedside of my mind? I may have aired this before but I'd like to repeat that I detest not one but four doctors: Dr. Freud, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Schweitzer, and Dr. Castro. Of course, the first takes the fig, as the fellows say in the dissecting-room.

I've no intention to dream the drab middle-class dreams of an Austrian crank with a shabby umbrella. I also suggest that the Freudian faith leads to dangerous ethical consequences, such as when a filthy murderer with the brain of a tapeworm is given a lighter sentence because his mother spanked him too much or too little—it works both ways. The Freudian racket looks to me as much of a farce as the jumbo thingum of polished wood with a polished hole in the middle which doesn't represent anything except the gaping face of the Philistine who is told it is a great sculpture produced by the greatest living caveman.

The novel on which you are working is, I believe, about 'time'? How do you see 'time'?

My new novel (now 800 typed pages long) is a family chronicle, mostly set in a dream America. Of its five parts one is built around my notion of time. I've drawn my scalpel through spacetime, space being the tumor, which I assign to the slops. While not having much physics, I reject Einstein's slick formulae; but then one need not know theology to be an atheist. Both my female creatures have Irish and Russian blood. One girl lasts 700 pages, dying young; her sister stays with me till the happy ending, when 95 candles burn in a birthday cake the size of a manhole lid.

Could you tell me which other writers you admire and have been influenced by?

I'd much prefer to speak of the modern books that I hate at first sight: the earnest case histories of minority groups, the sorrows of homosexuals, the anti-American Sovietism sermon, the picaresque yarn larded with juvenile obscenities. That's a good example of self-imposed classification—books stuck together in damp lumpy groups, forgotten titles, amalgamated authors. As for influence, well, I've never been influenced by anyone in particular, dead or quick, just as I've never belonged to any club or movement.

In fact, I don't seem to belong to any clear-cut continent. I'm the shuttlecock above the Atlantic, and how bright and blue it is there, in my private sky, far from the pigeonholes and the clay pigeons.

The pattern of games such as chess and poker seems to hold a great fascination for you and to correspond to a fatalistic view of life. Could you explain the role of fate in your novels?

I leave the solution of such riddles to my scholarly commentators, to the nightingale voices in the apple trees of knowledge. Impersonally speaking, I can't find any so-called main ideas, such as that of fate, in my novels, or at least none that would be expressed lucidly in less than the number of words I used for this or that book. Moreover, I'm not interested in games as such. Games mean the participation of other persons; I'm interested in the lone performance—chess problems, for example, which I compose in glacial solitude.

There are constant references in your novels to popular movies and pulp fiction. You seem to delight in the atmosphere of such popular culture. Do you enjoy the originals and how do these relate to your own use of them?

No, I loathe popular pulp, I loathe go-go gangs, I loathe jungle music, I loathe science fiction with its gals and goons, suspense and suspensories. I especially loathe vulgar movies—cripples raping nuns under tables, or naked-girl breasts squeezing against the tanned torsos of repulsive young males. And, really, I don't think I mock popular trash more often than do other authors who believe with me that a good laugh is the best pesticide.

What has the fact of exile from Russia meant to you?

The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with whom I feel some

affinity; but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing—the banning of his books. All my books, ever since I wrote my first one 43 years ago on the moth-eaten couch of a German boardinghouse, are suppressed in the country of my birth. It's Russia's loss, not mine.

There is a sense, in all your fiction, of the imagined being so much truer than boring old reality. Do you see the categories of imagination, dream, and reality as distinct and, if so, in what way?

Your use of the word “reality” perplexes me. To be sure, there is an average reality, perceived by all of us, but that is not true reality: it is only the reality of general ideas, conventional forms of humdrummery, current editorials. Now if you mean by “old reality” the so-called “realism” of old novels, the easy platitudes of Balzac or Somerset Maugham or D. H. Lawrence—to take some especially depressing examples—then you are right in suggesting that the reality faked by a mediocre performer is boring, and that imaginary worlds acquire by contrast a dreamy and unreal aspect. Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are, of course, those that seem unusual. When my fancies will have been sufficiently imitated, they, too, will enter the common domain of average reality, which will be false, too, but within a new context which we cannot yet guess. Average reality begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture.

Would it be fair to say that you see life as a very funny but cruel joke?

Your term “life” is used in a sense which I cannot apply to a manifold shimmer. Whose life? What life? Life does not exist without a possessive epithet. Lenin's life differs from, say, James Joyce's as much as a handful of gravel does

from a blue diamond, although both men were exiles in Switzerland and both wrote a vast number of words. Or take the destinies of Oscar Wilde and Lewis Carroll—one flaunting a flamboyant perversion and getting caught, and the other hiding his humble but much more evil little secret behind the emulsions of the developing-room, and ending up by being the greatest children's story writer of all time. I'm not responsible for those real-life farces. My own life has been incomparably happier and healthier than that of Genghis Khan, who is said to have fathered the first Nabok, a petty Tatar prince in the twelfth century who married a Russian damsel in an era of intensely artistic Russian culture. As to the lives of my characters, not all are grotesque and not all are tragic: Fyodor in *The Gift* is blessed with a faithful love and an early recognition of his genius; John Shade in *Pale Fire* leads an intense inner existence, far removed from what you call a joke. You must be confusing me with Dostoevski.

10

Before coming to Montreux in mid-March, 1969, *Time* reporters Martha Duffy and R. Z. Sheppard sent me a score of questions by telex. The answers, neatly typed out, were awaiting them when they arrived, whereupon they added a dozen more, of which I answered seven. Some of the lot were quoted in the May 23, 1969, issue—the one with my face on the cover.

There seem to be similarities in the rhythm and tone of Speak, Memory and Ada, and in the way you and Van retrieve the past in images. Do you both work along similar lines?

The more gifted and talkative one's characters are, the greater the chances of their resembling the author in tone or tint of mind. It is a familiar embarrassment that I face with very faint qualms, particularly since I am not really aware of any special similarities—just as one is not aware of sharing mannerisms with a detestable kinsman. I loathe Van Veen.

The following two quotations seem closely related: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another." (Speak, Memory) and "pure time, perceptual time, tangible time, time free of content, context and running commentary—this is my time and theme. All the rest is numerical symbol or some aspect of

space.” (Ada). Will you give me a lift on your magic carpet to point out how time is animated in the story of Van and Ada?

In his study of time my creature distinguishes between text and texture, between the contents of time and its almost tangible essence. I ignored that distinction in my *Speak, Memory* and was mainly concerned with being faithful to the patterns of my past. I suspect that Van Veen, having less control over his imagination than I, novelized in his indulgent old age many images of his youth.

You have spoken in the past of your indifference to music, but in Ada you describe time as “rhythm, the tender intervals between stresses.” Are these rhythms musical, aural, physical, cerebral, what?

Those “intervals” which seem to reveal the gray gaps of time between the black bars of space are much more similar to the interspaces between a metronome’s monotonous beats than to the varied rhythms of music or verse.

If, as you have said, “mediocrity thrives on ‘ideas,’ ” why does Van, who is no mediocrity, start explaining at length near the end of the book his ideas about time? Is this the vanity of Van? Or is the author commenting on or parodying his story?

By “ideas” I meant of course general ideas, the big, sincere ideas which permeate a so-called great novel, and which, in the inevitable long run, amount to bloated topicalities stranded like dead whales. I don’t see any connection between this and my short section devoted to a savant’s tussle with a recondite riddle.

Van remarks that “we are explorers in a very strange universe,” and this reader feels that way about Ada. You are known for your drawings—is it possible to draw your created universe? You have said that the whole substance of a book is in your head when you start writing on the cards. When did terra, antiterra, demonia,

Ardis, etc., enter the picture? Why are the annals for terra fifty years behind? Also, various inventions and mechanical contrivances (like Prince Zemski's bugged harem) make seemingly anachronistic appearances. Why?

Antiterra happens to be an anachronistic world in regard to Terra—that's all there is to it.

In the Robert Hughes film about you, you say that in Ada, metaphors start to live and turn into a story . . . "bleed and then dry up." Will you elaborate, please?

The reference is to the metaphors in the Texture-of-Time section of *Ada*: gradually and gracefully they form a story—the story of a man traveling by car through Switzerland from east to west; and then the images fade out again.

Was Ada the most difficult of your books to write? If so, would you discuss the major difficulties?

Ada was physically harder to compose than my previous novels because of its greater length. In terms of the index cards on which I write and rewrite my stuff in pencil, it made, in the final draft, some 2,500 cards which Mme. Callier, my typist since *Pale Fire*, turned into more than 850 pages. I began working on the Texture-of-Time section some ten years ago, in Ithaca, upstate New York, but only in February, 1966, did the entire novel leap into the kind of existence that can and must be put into words. Its springboard was Ada's telephone call (in what is now the penultimate part of the book).

You call Ada a family novel. Is your reversal of the sentiment in the opening line of Anna Karenin a parody or do you think your version is more often true? Is incest one of the different possible roads to happiness? Are the Veens happy at Ardis—or only in the memory of Ardis?

If I had used incest for the purpose of representing a possible road to happiness or misfortune, I would have

been a best-selling didactician dealing in general ideas. Actually I don't give a damn for incest one way or another. I merely like the "bl" sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable. The opening sentences of *Ada* inaugurate a series of blasts directed throughout the book at translators of unprotected masterpieces who betray their authors by "transfigurations" based on ignorance and self-assertiveness.

Do you distinguish between Van the artist and Van the scientist? As his creator, what is your opinion of Van's works? Is Ada in part about an artist's inner life? In the Hughes film, you speak of illusionary moves in novels as in chess. Does Van make some false turnings in his story?

Objective, or at least one-mirror-removed, opinions of Van's efforts are stated quite clearly in the case of his *Letters from Terra* and two or three other compositions of his. I—or whoever impersonates me—is obviously on Van's side in the account of his anti-Vienna lecture on dreams.

Is Ada the artist's muse? How much does Van know about her? She seems to appear and reappear in his story and to dramatize successive stages of his life. When he borrows the first line of 'L'invitation au voyage' in his poem to her, does he suggest so close an identification as Baudelaire's—'aimer et mourir au pays qui te ressemble' ?

A pretty thought but not mine.

The twelve-year-old Ada's precocious sexuality is bound to bring comparison to Lolita. Is there any other connection between the two girls in your mind? Do you have the same affection for her as for Lolita? Is it, as Van says, that "all bright kids are depraved"?

The fact that Ada and Lolita lose their virginity at the same age is about the only peg on which to hang a comparison. Incidentally, Lolita, diminutive of Dolores, a little Spanish gypsy, is mentioned many times throughout *Ada*.

You once remarked that you are an "indivisible monist." Please elaborate.

Monism, which implies a oneness of basic reality, is seen to be divisible when, say, "mind" sneakily splits away from "matter" in the reasoning of a muddled monist or half-hearted materialist.

What are your future writing plans? You have mentioned publishing a book on Joyce and Kafka and your Cornell lectures. Will they appear soon? Are you thinking about another novel? Can you say anything about it now? Any poetry?

I have been working for the last months on an English translation of some of my Russian poems (dating from 1916 to this day) commissioned by McGraw-Hill. In 1968, I finished revising for the Princeton Press a second edition of my *Eugene Onegin* which will be even more gloriously and monstrously literal than the first.

Do you ever consider returning to America? To California, as you mentioned a few years ago? Can you say why you left the US? Do you still feel in some way American?

I am an American, I feel American, and I like that feeling. I live in Europe for family reasons, and I pay a US federal income tax on every cent I earn at home or abroad. Frequently, especially in spring, I dream of going to spend my purple-plumed sunset in California, among the larkspurs and oaks, and in the serene silence of her university libraries.

Would you ever want to teach or lecture again?

No. Much as I like teaching, the strain of preparing lectures and delivering them would be too fatiguing today, even if I used a tape recorder. In this respect I have long come to the conclusion that the best teaching is done by records which a student can run as many times as he wants, or has to, in his soundproof cell. And at the end of the year

he should undergo an old-fashioned, difficult, four-hour-long examination, with monitors walking between the desks.

Are you interested in working on the movie of Ada? With its tactile, sensual beauty and its overlapping visual images, Ada seems a natural for films. There are stories of film executives converging on Montreux to read and bid on the book. Did you meet them? Did they ask many questions or seek your advice?

Yes, film people did converge on my hotel in Montreux—keen minds, great enchanters. And, yes, I would indeed like very much to write, or help writing, a screenplay that would reflect *Ada*.

Some of your funniest remarks in recent novels have concerned driving and the problems of the road (including the image of the author groping with time as with the contents of a glove compartment). Do you drive? Enjoy motoring? Do you travel much? What means do you prefer? Have you plans to travel in the next year or so?

In the summer of 1915, in northern Russia, I, an adventurous lad of sixteen, noticed one day that our chauffeur had left the family convertible throbbing all alone before its garage (part of the huge stable at our place in the country); next moment I had driven the thing, with a sickly series of bumps, into the nearest ditch. That was the first time I ever drove a car. The second and last time was thirty-five years later, somewhere in the States, when my wife let me take the wheel for a few seconds and I narrowly missed crashing into the only car standing at the far side of a spacious parking lot. Between 1949 and 1959 she has driven me more than 150,000 miles all over North America—mainly on butterfly-hunting trips.

Salinger and Updike seem to be the only US writers you have praised. Have you any additions to the list? Have you read

Norman Mailer's recent political and social reportage (Armies of the Night)? If so, do you admire it? Do you admire any American poets in particular?

This reminds me: You know, it sounds preposterous, but I was invited last year to cover that political convention in Chicago in the company of two or three other writers. I did not go, naturally, and still believe it must have been some sort of joke on the part of *Esquire*—inviting *me* who can't tell a Democrat from a Republican and hates crowds and demonstrations.

What is your opinion of Russian writers like Solzhenitzyn, Abram Tertz, Andrey Voznesenski, who have been widely read in the last couple of years in the US?

It is only from a literary point of view that I could discuss fellow artists, and that would entail, in the case of the brave Russians you mention, a professional examination not only of virtues but also of flaws. I do not think that such objectivity would be fair in the livid light of the political persecution which brave Russians endure.

How often do you see your son? How do you and he collaborate on translating your work? Do you work together from the start of a project or do you act as editor or adviser?

We chose the hub of Europe for domicile not to be too far from our son Dmitri who lives near Milan. We see him not as often as we would like, now that his operatic career (he has a magnificent bass voice) requires him to travel to various countries. This defeats somewhat our purpose of residing in Europe. It also means that he cannot devote as much time as before to co-translating my old stuff.

In Ada Van says that a man who loses his memory will room in heaven with guitarists rather than great or even mediocre writers. What would be your preference in celestial neighbors?

It would be fun to hear Shakespeare roar with ribald

laughter on being told what Freud (roasting in the other place) made of his plays. It would satisfy one's sense of justice to see H. G. Wells invited to more parties under the cypresses than slightly bogus Conrad. And I would love to find out from Pushkin whether his duel with Ryleev, in May, 1820, was really fought in the park of Batovo (later my grandmother's estate) as I was the first to suggest in 1964.

Will you speak briefly about the émigré life of the twenties and thirties? Where, for instance, were you a tennis instructor? Whom did you teach? Mr. Appel mentioned that he thought you gave lectures to émigré groups. If so, what were your subjects? It seems you must have traveled a good deal. Is that true?

I gave tennis lessons to the same people, or friends of the same people, to whom I gave lessons of English or French since around 1921, when I still shuttled between Cambridge and Berlin, where my father was co-editor of an émigré Russian language daily, and where I more or less settled after his death in 1922. In the thirties I was frequently asked to give public readings of my prose and verse by émigré organizations. In the course of those activities I traveled to Paris, Prague, Brussels and London, and then, one blessed day in 1939, Aldanov, a fellow writer and a dear friend, said to me: "Look, next summer or the one after that, I am invited to lecture at Stanford in California but I cannot go, so would you like to replace me?" That's how the third spiral of my life started to coil.

Where and when did you meet your wife? Where and when did you marry? Can you or she describe her background and girlhood briefly? In what city and/or country did you court her? If I am correct that she is also Russian, did you or any of your brothers and sisters meet her when you were children?

I met my wife, Véra Slonim, at one of the émigré charity balls in Berlin at which it was fashionable for Russian

young ladies to sell punch, books, flowers, and toys. Her father was a St. Petersburg jurist and industrialist, ruined by the revolution. We might have met years earlier at some party in St. Petersburg where we had friends in common. We married in 1925, and were at first extremely hard up.

The Appels and others have said that Cornell's student literati were less attracted to your fiction course than sorority sisters, frat brothers, and athletes. Were you aware of that? If the above is true, the reason given was that you were "a flamboyant, funny lecturer." This description seems at variance with your self-drawn picture as a remote lecturer. Can you talk just a little more about your life as a teacher, as this is an inevitable part of the cover story. How did the students seem to you then? They called the big course "Dirty Lit." Do you think it was you or the Masterpieces of European Fiction that shocked them? Or would anything have shocked them? What would you think of teaching on today's more activist, demonstration-struck campuses?

Classes varied from term to term during my seventeen years of teaching. I do remember that my approach and principles irritated or puzzled such students of literature (and their professors) as were accustomed to "serious" courses replete with "trends," and "schools," and "myths," and "symbols," and "social comment," and something unspeakably spooky called "climate of thought." Actually, those "serious" courses were quite easy ones, with the student required to know not the books but about the books. In my classes, readers had to discuss specific details, not general ideas. "Dirty Lit" was an inherited joke: it had been applied to the lectures of my immediate predecessor, a sad, gentle, hard-drinking fellow who was more interested in the sex life of authors than in their books. Activist, demonstration-struck students of the present decade would, I suppose, either drop my course after a couple of lectures or end by getting a fat F if they could not answer such exam questions as: *Discuss the twinned-dream theme in the*

case of two teams of dreamers, Stephen D.—Bloom, and Vronski—Anna. None of my questions ever presupposed the advocacy of a fashionable interpretation or critical view that a teacher might wish to promote. All my questions were impelled by only one purpose: to discover at all cost if the student had thoroughly imbibed and assimilated the novels in my course.

I can now see that if you don't share Van's system of "distressibles," you well might. Are you, like him, insomniac?

I have described the insomnias of my childhood in *Speak, Memory*. They still persecute me every other night. Helpful pills do exist but I am afraid of them. I detest drugs. My habitual hallucinations are quite monstrously sufficient, thank Hades. Looking at it objectively, I have never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind than mine.

Immediately following the above quote, Van warns against the "assassin pun." You are obviously a brilliant and untiring punner and it would seem particularly appropriate if you would briefly discuss the pun for Time which, God knows, is porous from the bullets of a particularly clumsy but determined assassin.

In a poem about poetry as he understands it, Verlaine warns the poet against using *la pointe assassine*, that is introducing an epigrammatic or moral point at the end of a poem, and thereby murdering the poem. What amused me was to pun on "point," thus making a pun in the very act of prohibiting it.

You have been a Sherlock Holmes buff. When did you lose your taste for mystery fiction. Why?

With a very few exceptions, mystery fiction is a kind of collage combining more or less original riddles with conventional and mediocre artwork.

Why do you so dislike dialogue in fiction?

Dialogue can be delightful if dramatically or comically stylized or artistically blended with descriptive prose; in other words, if it is a feature of style and structure in a given work. If not, then it is nothing but automatic typewriting, formless speeches filling page after page, over which the eye skims like a flying saucer over the Dust Bowl.

11

In April, 1969, Alden Whitman sent me these questions and came to Montreux for a merry interview shortly before my seventieth birthday. His piece appeared in *The New York Times*, April 19, 1969, with only two or three of my answers retained. The rest are to be used, I suppose, as "Special to The New York Times" at some later date by A. W., if he survives, or by his successor. I transcribe some of our exchanges.

You have called yourself "an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England." How does this make you an American writer?

An American writer means, in the present case, a writer who has been an American citizen for a quarter of a century. It means, moreover, that all my works appear first in America. It also means that America is the only country where I feel mentally and emotionally at home. Rightly or wrongly, I am not one of those perfectionists who by dint of hypercriticizing America find themselves wallowing in the same muddy camp with indigenous rascals and envious foreign observers. My admiration for this adopted country of mine can easily survive the jolts and flaws that, indeed, are nothing in comparison to the abyss of evil in the history of Russia, not to speak of other, more exotic, countries.

In the poem "To My Soul," you wrote, possibly of yourself, as "a provincial naturalist, an eccentric lost in paradise." This appears to link your interest in butterflies to other aspects of your life, writing, for instance. Do you feel that you are "an eccentric lost in paradise"?

An eccentric is a person whose mind and senses are excited by things that the average citizen does not even notice. And, per contra, the average eccentric—for there are many of us, of different waters and magnitudes—is utterly baffled and bored by the adjacent tourist who boasts of his business connections. In that sense, I often feel lost; but then, other people feel lost in my presence too. And I also know, as a good eccentric should, that the dreary old fellow who has been telling me all about the rise of mortgage interest rates may suddenly turn out to be the greatest living authority on springtails or tumblebugs.

Dreams of flight or escape recur in many of your poems and stories. Is this a reflection of your own years of wandering?

Yes, in part. The odd fact, however, is that in my early childhood, long before the tremendously dull peripatetics of Revolution and Civil War set in, I suffered from nightmares full of wanderings and escapes, and desolate station platforms.

What did you enjoy (and disenjoy) in your Harvard experience? And what induced you to leave Cambridge?

My Harvard experience consisted of seven blissful years (1941–1948) of entomological research at the wonderful and unforgettable Museum of Comparative Zoology and of one spring term (1952) of lecturing on the European novel to an audience of some 600 young strangers in Memorial Hall. Apart from that experience, I lectured at Wellesley for half-a-dozen years and then, from 1948, was on the faculty of Cornell, ending as full professor of Russian Literature and author of American *Lolita*, after which (in 1959) I

decided to devote myself entirely to writing. I greatly enjoyed Cornell.

In the United States you are probably more widely known for Lolita than for any other single book or poem. If you had your way, what book or poem or story would you like to be known for in the U.S.?

I am immune to the convulsions of fame; yet, I think that the harmful drudges who define today, in popular dictionaries, the word "nymphet" as "a very young but sexually attractive girl," without any additional comment or reference, should have their knuckles rapped.

Has the sexual kick in literature reached a peak? Will it not now decline?

I am completely indifferent to the social aspect of this or any other group activity. Historically, the pornographic record set by the ancients still remains unbroken. Artistically, the dirtier typewriters try to get, the more conventional and corny their products become, e.g. such novels as *Miller's Thumb* and *Tailor's Spasm*.

What is your attitude toward modern violence?

I abhor the brutality of all brutes, white or black, brown or red. I despise red knaves and pink fools.

Reflecting on your life, what have been its truly significant moments?

Every moment, practically. Yesterday's letter from a reader in Russia, the capture of an undescribed butterfly last year, learning to ride a bicycle in 1909.

How do you rank yourself among writers (living) and of the immediate past?

I often think there should exist a special typographical

sign for a smile—some sort of concave mark, a supine round bracket, which I would now like to trace in reply to your question.

If you were writing your own obituary, what would you stress or emphasize as your contribution to literature, to the climate of opinion (art and esthetics) of the last 50 years?

In my case the afterglow of a recent work (say, *Ada*, finished last Christmas) mingles at once with the hazy aurora of a new task. My next book, dawning as it does in ideal tint and tone, seems for the moment better than anything I wrote before. What I am trying to emphasize is a special thrill of anticipation which by its very nature cannot be treated necrologically.

What books have you enjoyed lately?

I seldom experience nowadays the spinal twinge which is the only valid reaction to a new piece of great poetry—such as, for example, Richard Wilbur's "Complaint," a poem about his marvelous duchess (Phoenix Bookshop edition, 1968).

12

In early June, 1969, Philip Oakes sent me a series of questions on behalf of *The Sunday Times*, London. I happened to be greatly annoyed by the editorial liberties that periodicals in other countries had been taking with material I had supplied. When he arrived on June 15, I gave him my written answers accompanied by the following note.

When preparing interviews I invariably write out my replies (and sometimes additional questions) taking great care to make them as concise as possible.

My replies represent unpublished material, should be printed verbatim and in toto, and copyrighted in my name.

Answers may be rearranged in whatever order the interviewer or the editor wishes: for example, they may be split, with insertion of the questioner's comments or bits of descriptive matter (but none of the latter material may be ascribed to me).

Unprepared remarks, quips, etc., may come from me during the actual colloquy but may not be published without my approval.

The article will be shown to me before publication so as to avoid factual errors (e.g., in names, dates, etc.).

Mr. Oakes' article appeared in *The Sunday Times* on June 22, 1969.

As a distinguished entomologist and novelist do you find that your two main preoccupations condition, restrict, or refine your view of the world?

What world? Whose world? If we mean the average

world of the average newspaper reader in Liverpool, Livorno, or Vilno, then we are dealing in trivial generalities. If, on the other hand, an artist invents his own world, as I think I do, then how can he be said to influence his own understanding of what he has created himself? As soon as we start defining such terms as "the writer," "the world," "the novel," and so on, we slip into a solipsismal abyss where general ideas dissolve. As to butterflies—well, my taxonomic papers on lepidoptera were published mainly in the nineteen forties, and can be of interest to only a few specialists in certain groups of American butterflies. In itself, an aurelian's passion is not a particularly unusual sickness; but it stands outside the limits of a novelist's world, and I can prove this by the fact that whenever I allude to butterflies in my novels, no matter how diligently I rework the stuff, it remains pale and false and does not really express what I want it to express—what, indeed, it can only express in the special scientific terms of my entomological papers. The butterfly that lives forever on its type-labeled pin and in its O. D. ("original description") in a scientific journal dies a messy death in the fumes of the arty gush. However—not to let your question go completely unanswered—I must admit that in one sense the entomological satellite does impinge upon my novelistic globe. This is when certain place-names are mentioned. Thus if I hear or read the words "Alp Grum, Engadine" the normal observer within me may force me to imagine the belvedere of a tiny hotel on its 2000-meter-tall perch and mowers working along a path that winds down to a toy railway; but what *I* see first of all and above all is the Yellow-banded Ringlet settled with folded wings on the flower that those damned scythes are about to behead.

What was the most amusing item you recently found in the papers?

That bit about Mr. E. Pound, a venerable fraud, making a "sentimental visit" to his alma mater in Clinton, New

York, and being given a standing ovation by the commencement audience—consisting, apparently, of morons and madmen.

Have you seen the cinema version of your Laughter in the Dark?

I have. Nicol Williamson is, of course, an admirable actor, and some of the sequences are very good. The scene with the water-ski girl, gulping and giggling, is exceptionally successful. But I was appalled by the commonplace quality of the sexual passages. I would like to say something about that. Clichés and conventions breed remarkably fast. They occur as readily in the primitive jollities of the jungle as in the civilized obligatory scenes of our theater. In former times Greek masks must have set many a Greek dentition on edge. In recent films, including *Laughter in the Dark*, the porno grapple has *already* become a cliché though the device is but half-a-dozen years old. I would have been sorry that Tony Richardson should have followed that trite trend, had it not given me the opportunity to form and formulate the following important notion: theatrical acting, in the course of the last centuries, has led to incredible refinements of stylized pantomime in the representation of, say, a person eating, or getting deliciously drunk, or looking for his spectacles, or making a proposal of marriage. Not so in regard to the imitation of the sexual act which on the stage has absolutely no tradition behind it. The Swedes and we have to start from scratch and what I have witnessed up to now on the screen—the blotchy male shoulder, the false howls of bliss, the four or five mingled feet—all of it is primitive, commonplace, conventional, and therefore disgusting. The lack of art and style in these paltry copulations is particularly brought into evidence by their clashing with the marvelously high level of acting in virtually all other imitations of natural gestures on our stage and screen. This is an attractive topic to ponder further, and directors should take notice of it.

When you are writing your novels, you have a remarkable sense of history and period, although the situations in which your characters are involved reflect perennial dilemmas. Do you feel that any given time creates special problems which interest you as a writer?

We should define, should we not, what we mean by "history." If "history" means a "written account of events" (and that is about all Clio can claim), then let us inquire *who* actually—what scribes, what secretaries—took it down and how qualified they were for the job. I am inclined to guess that a big part of "history" (the unnatural history of man—not the naive testimony of rocks) has been modified by mediocre writers and prejudiced observers. We know that police states (*e.g.*, the Soviets) have actually snipped out and destroyed such past events in old books as did not conform to the falsehoods of the present. But even the most talented and conscientious historian may err. In other words, I do not believe that "history" exists apart from the historian. If I try to select a keeper of records, I think it safer (for my comfort, at least) to choose my own self. But nothing recorded or thought up by myself can create any special "problems" in the sense you suggest.

You say somewhere that, artistically speaking, you prefer Lolita to all your other books. Has your new novel Ada superseded Lolita in your affection?

Not really. It is true that *Ada* caused me more trouble than all my other novels and perhaps that bright fringe of overlapping worry is synonymous with the crest of love. Incidentally, speaking of my first nymphet, let me take this neat opportunity to correct a curious misconception proffered by an anonymous owl in a London weekly a couple of months ago. "Lolita" should not be pronounced in the English or Russian fashion (as he thinks it should), but with a trill of Latin "l"s and a delicate toothy "t."

Do you feel isolated as a writer?

Most of the writers I have met were Russian émigrés in the nineteen twenties and thirties. With American novelists I have had virtually no contact. In England, I had lunch once with Graham Greene. I have dined with Joyce and have had tea with Robbe-Grillet. Isolation means liberty and discovery. A desert island may be more exciting than a city, but my loneliness, on the whole, has little significance. It is a consequence of chance circumstance—old shipwrecks, freakish tides—and not a matter of temperament. As a private person I am good-natured, warm, cheerful, straightforward, plainspoken, and intolerant of bogus art. I do not mind my own writings being criticized or ignored and therefore think it funny that people not even concerned with literature should be upset by my finding D. H. Lawrence execrable or my seeing in H. G. Wells a far greater artist than Conrad.

What do you think of the so-called “student revolution”?

Rowdies are never revolutionary, they are always reactionary. It is among the young that the greatest conformists and Philistines are found, e.g., the hippies with their group beards and group protests. Demonstrators at American universities care as little about education as football fans who smash up subway stations in England care about soccer. All belong to the same family of goofy hoodlums—with a sprinkling of clever rogues among them.

What are your working methods?

Quite banal. Thirty years ago I used to write in bed, dipping my pen into a bedside inkwell, or else I would compose mentally at any time of the day or night. I would fall asleep when the sparrows woke up. Nowadays I write my stuff on index cards, in pencil, at a lectern, in the forenoon; but I still tend to do a lot of work in my head

during long walks in the country on dull days when butterflies do not interfere. Here is a disappointed lepidopterist's ditty:

It's a long climb
Up the rock face
At the wrong time
To the right place.

Do you keep a journal or seek documentary reminders?

I am an ardent memoirist with a rotten memory; a drowsy king's absentminded remembrancer. With absolute lucidity I recall landscapes, gestures, intonations, a million sensuous details, but names and numbers topple into oblivion with absurd abandon like little blind men in file from a pier.

13

Of the fifty-eight questions James Mossman submitted on September 8, 1969, for *Review*, BBC-2 (October 4) some 40 were answered and recorded by me from written cards in Montreux. *The Listener* published the thing in an incomplete form on October 23 of that year. Printed here from my final typescript.

You have said that you explored time's prison and have found no way out. Are you still exploring, and is it inevitably a solitary excursion, from which one returns to the solace of others?

I'm a very poor speaker. I hope our audience won't mind my using notes.

My exploration of time's prison as described in the first chapter of *Speak, Memory* was only a stylistic device meant to introduce my subject.

Memory often presents a life broken into episodes, more or less perfectly recalled. Do you see any themes working through from one episode to another?

Everyone can sort out convenient patterns of related themes in the past development of his life. Here again I had to provide pegs and echoes when furnishing my reception halls.

Is the strongest tie between men this common captivity in time?

Let us not generalize. The common captivity in time is

felt differently by different people, and some people may not feel it at all. Generalizations are full of loopholes and traps. I know elderly men for whom “time” only means “timepiece.”

What distinguishes us from animals?

Being aware of being aware of being. In other words, if I not only know that I *am* but also know that I know it, then I belong to the human species. All the rest follows—the glory of thought, poetry, a vision of the universe. In that respect, the gap between ape and man is immeasurably greater than the one between amoeba and ape. The difference between an ape’s memory and human memory is the difference between an ampersand and the British Museum library.

Judging from your own awakening consciousness as a child, do you think that the capacity to use language, syntax, relate ideas, is something we learn from adults, as if we were computers being programed, or do we begin to use a unique, built-in capability of our own—call it imagination?

The stupidest person in the world is an all-round genius compared to the cleverest computer. How we learn to imagine and express things is a riddle with premises impossible to express and a solution impossible to imagine.

In your acute scrutiny of your past, can you find the instruments that fashioned you?

Yes—unless I refashion them retrospectively, by the very act of evoking them. There is quite a lot of give and take in the game of metaphors.

As you recall a patch of time, its shapes, sounds, colors, and occupants, does this complete picture help combat time or offer any clue to its mysteries, or is it pleasure that it affords?

Let me quote a paragraph in my book *Ada*: “Physiologi-

cally the sense of Time is a sense of continuous becoming. . . . Philosophically, on the other hand, Time is but memory in the making. In every individual life there goes on, from cradle to deathbed, the gradual shaping and strengthening of that *backbone of consciousness*, which is the Time of the strong." This is Van speaking, Van Veen, the charming villain of my book. I have not decided yet if I agree with him in all his views on the texture of time. I suspect I don't.

Does the inevitable distortion of detail worry you?

Not at all. The distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction, but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past.

You've said that the man in you revolts sometimes against the fictionist. Can you say why? (Note: I'm thinking of your regret at giving items of your past to characters.)

One hates oneself for leaving a pet with a neighbor and never returning for it.

Doesn't giving away past memories to your characters alleviate the burden of the past?

Items of one's past are apt to fade from exposure. They are like those richly pigmented butterflies and moths which the ignorant amateur hangs up in a display case on the wall of his sunny parlor and which, after a few years, are bleached to a pitiful drab hue. The metallic blue of so-called structural wing scales is hardier, but even so a wise collector should keep specimens in the dry dark of a cabinet.

You have written of yourself as looking out "from my present ridge of remote, isolated, almost uninhabited time." Why uninhabited?

Well, for the same reason that a desert island is a more

deserving island than one with a footprint initialing its beach. Moreover, “uninhabited” makes direct sense here, since most of my former companions are gone.

Does the aristocrat in you despise the fictionist, or is it only English aristocrats who feel queasy about men of letters?

Pushkin, professional poet and Russian nobleman, used to shock the *beau monde* by declaring that he wrote for his own pleasure but published for the sake of money. I do likewise, but have never shocked anybody—except, perhaps, a former publisher of mine who used to counter my indignant requests by saying that I’m much too good a writer to need extravagant advances.

Is the capacity to recall and to celebrate patches of past time a special quality of yours?

No, I don’t think so. I could name many writers, English, Russian, and French, who have done it at least as well as I have. Funny, I notice that when mentioning my three tongues, I list them in that order because it is the best rhythmic arrangement: either dactylic, with one syllable skipped, “Énglish, Rússian, and Frénch,” or anapestic, “English, Rússian, and Frénch.” Little lesson in prosody.

Have you ever experienced hallucinations or heard voices or had visions, and if so, have they been illuminating?

When about to fall asleep after a good deal of writing or reading, I often enjoy, if that is the right word, what some drug addicts experience—a continuous series of extraordinary bright, fluidly changing pictures. Their type is different nightly, but on a given night it remains the same: one night it may be a banal kaleidoscope of endlessly recombined and reshaped stained-window designs; next time, comes a subhuman or superhuman face with a formidably growing blue eye; or, and this is the most striking type, I

see in realistic detail a long-dead friend turning toward me and melting into another remembered figure against the black velvet of my eyelids' inner side. As to voices, I have described in *Speak, Memory* the snatches of telephone talk which now and then vibrate in my pillowed ear. Reports on those enigmatic phenomena can be found in the case histories collected by psychiatrists but no satisfying interpretation has come my way. Freudians, keep out, please.

Your best memories seem to be golden days, with great green trees, splashes of sun on venerable stone, harmony—a world in which people were going to live for ever. Do you manipulate the past in order to combat life at its less harmonious?

My existence has always remained as harmonious and green as it was throughout the span dealt with in my memoirs, that is from 1903 to 1940. The emotions of my Russian childhood have been replaced by new excitements, by new mountains explored in search of new butterflies, by a cloudless family life, and by the monstrous delights of novelistic invention.

Is writing your novels pleasure or drudgery?

Pleasure and agony while composing the book in my mind; harrowing irritation when struggling with my tools and viscera—the pencil that needs resharpening, the card that has to be rewritten, the bladder that has to be drained, the word that I always misspell and always have to look up. Then the labor of reading the typescript prepared by a secretary, the correction of my major mistakes and her minor ones, transferring corrections to other copies, misplacing pages, trying to remember something that had to be crossed out or inserted. Repeating the process when proof-reading. Unpacking the radiant beautiful plump advance copy, opening it—and discovering a stupid oversight committed by me, allowed by me to survive. After a month or so I get used to the book's final stage, to its having been

weaned from my brain. I now regard it with a kind of amused tenderness as a man regards not his son, but the young wife of his son.

You say you are not interested in what critics say, yet you got very angry with Edmund Wilson once for commenting on you, and let off some heavy field guns at him, not to say multiple rockets. You must have cared.

I never retaliate when my works of art are concerned. There the arrows of adverse criticism cannot scratch, let alone pierce, the shield of what disappointed archers call my “self-assurance.” But I do reach for my heaviest dictionary when my scholarship is questioned, as was the case with my old friend Edmund Wilson, and I do get annoyed when people I never met impinge on my privacy with false and vulgar assumptions—as for example Mr. Updike, who in an otherwise clever article absurdly suggests that my fictional character, bitchy and lewd Ada, is, I quote, “in a dimension or two, Nabokov’s wife.” I might add that I collect clippings—for information and entertainment.

Do you see yourself sometimes as Nabokov the writer isolated from others, flaming sword to scourge them, an entertainer, a drudge, a genius, which?

The word “genius” is passed around rather generously, isn’t it? At least in English, because its Russian counterpart, *geniy*, is a term brimming with a sort of throaty awe and is used only in the case of a very small number of writers, Shakespeare, Milton, Pushkin, Tolstoy. To such deeply beloved authors as Turgenev and Chekhov Russians assign the thinner term, *talánt*, talent, not genius. It is a bizarre example of semantic discrepancy—the same word being more substantial in one language than in another. Although my Russian and my English are practically coeval, I still feel appalled and puzzled at seeing “genius”

applied to any important storyteller, such as Maupassant or Maugham. Genius still means to me, in my Russian fastidiousness and pride of phrase, a unique, dazzling gift, the genius of James Joyce, not the talent of Henry James. I'm afraid I have lost the thread of my reply to your question. What is your next one, please?

Can political ideas solve any of the big problems of an individual's life?

I have always marveled at the neatness of such solutions: ardent Stalinists transforming themselves into harmless Socialists, Socialists finding a sunset harbor in Conservatism, and so forth. I suppose this must be rather like religious conversion, of which I know very little. I can only explain God's popularity by an atheist's panic.

Why do you say you dislike "serious" writers? Don't you just mean "bad" artists?

Let me put it this way. By inclination and intent I avoid squandering my art on the illustrated catalogues of solemn notions and serious opinions; and I dislike their pervasive presence in the works of others. What ideas can be traced in my novels belong to my creatures therein and may be deliberately flawed. In my memoirs, quotable ideas are merely passing visions, suggestions, mirages of the mind. They lose their colors or explode like football fish when lifted out of the context of their tropical sea.

Great writers have had strong political and sociological preferences or ideas. Tolstoy was one. Does the presence of such ideas in his work make you think the less of him?

I go by books, not by authors. I consider *Anna Karenin* the supreme masterpiece of nineteenth-century literature; it is closely followed by *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. I detest *Resurrection* and *The Kreuzer Sonata*. Tolstoy's publicistic

forays are unreadable. *War and Peace*, though a little too long, is a rollicking historical novel written for that amorphous and limp creature known as "the general reader," and more specifically for the young. In terms of artistic structure it does not satisfy me. I derive no pleasure from its cumbersome message, from the didactic interludes, from the artificial coincidences, with cool Prince Andrey turning up to witness this or that historical moment, this or that footnote in the sources used often uncritically by the author.

Why do you dislike writers who go in for soul-searching and self-revelations in print? After all, do you not do it at another remove, behind a thicket of art?

If you are alluding to Dostoevski's worst novels, then, indeed, I dislike intensely *The Karamazov Brothers* and the ghastly *Crime and Punishment* rigmarole. No, I do not object to soul-searching and self-revelation, but in those books the soul, and the sins, and the sentimentality, and the journalese, hardly warrant the tedious and muddled search.

Is your attachment to childhood specially nostalgic and intense because you were abruptly and forever banished from the place where it evolved by the Russian Revolution?

Yes, that's right. But the stress is not on Russian Revolution. It could have been anything, an earthquake, an illness, an individual departure prompted by a private disaster. The accent is on the abruptness of the change.

Would you ever try to go back there, just to have a look?

There's nothing to look at. New tenement houses and old churches do not interest me. The hotels there are terrible. I detest the Soviet theater. Any palace in Italy is superior to the repainted abodes of the Tsars. The village huts in the forbidden hinterland are as dismally poor as ever, and the wretched peasant flogs his wretched cart horse with the same wretched zest. As to my special northern land-

scape and the haunts of my childhood—well, I would not wish to contaminate their images preserved in my mind.

How would you define your alienation from present-day Russia?
I loathe and despise dictatorships.

You called the Revolution there “trite.” Why?

Because it followed the banal historical pattern of bloodshed, deceit, and oppression, because it betrayed the democratic dream, and because all it can promise the Soviet citizen is the material article, second-hand Philistine values, imitation of Western foods and gadgets, and of course, caviar for the decorated general.

Why do you live in hotels?

It simplifies postal matters, it eliminates the nuisance of private ownership, it confirms me in my favorite habit—the habit of freedom.

Do you have a longing for one place ever, a place in which family or racial continuity has been witnessed for generations, a scrap of Russia in return for the whole of the United States?

I have no such longings.

Is nostalgia debilitating or enriching?

Neither. It's one of a thousand tender emotions.

Do you like being an American citizen?

Yes, very much so.

Did you sit up to watch the Americans land on the moon? Were you impressed?

Oh, “impressed” is not the right word! Treading the soil of the moon gives one, I imagine (or rather my projected

self imagines), the most remarkable romantic thrill ever experienced in the history of discovery. *Of course*, I rented a television set to watch every moment of their marvelous adventure. That gentle little minuet that despite their awkward suits the two men danced with such grace to the tune of lunar gravity was a lovely sight. It was also a moment when a flag means to one more than a flag usually does. I am puzzled and pained by the fact that the English weeklies ignored the absolutely overwhelming excitement of the adventure, the strange sensual exhilaration of palpat-ing those precious pebbles, of seeing our marbled globe in the black sky, of feeling along one's spine the shiver and wonder of it. After all, Englishmen should understand that thrill, they who have been the greatest, the purest explorers. Why then drag in such irrelevant matters as wasted dollars and power politics?

If you ruled any modern industrial state absolutely, what would you abolish?

I would abolish trucks and transistors, I would outlaw the diabolical roar of motorcycles, I would wring the neck of soft music in public places. I would banish the *bidet* from hotel bathrooms so as to make more room for a longer bathtub. I would forbid farmers the use of insecticides and allow them to mow their meadows only once a year, in late August when everyone has safely pupated.

Do you like reading newspapers?

Yes, especially the Sunday papers.

You refer somewhere to your father's study teaching you to appreciate authentic poetry. Is any living poet authentic to you now?

I used to have a veritable passion for poetry, English, Russian, and French. That passion started to dwindle

around 1940 when I stopped gorging myself on contemporary verse. I know as little about today's poetry as about new music.

Are too many people writing novels?

I read quite a number of them every year. For some odd reason what authors and publishers keep sending me is the pseudo-picaresque stuff of cliché characters and the enlarged pores of dirty words.

You parody the poet W. H. Auden in your novel Ada, I think. Why do you think so little of him?

I do not parody Mr. Auden anywhere in *Ada*. I'm not sufficiently familiar with his poetry for that. I do know, however, a few of his translations—and deplore the blunders he so lightheartedly permits himself. Robert Lowell, of course, is the greater offender.

Ada has a lot of word play, punning, parody—do you acknowledge influence by James Joyce in your literary upbringing, and do you admire him?

I played with words long before I read *Ulysses*. Yes, I love that book but it is rather the lucidity and precision of its prose that pleases me. The real puns are in *Finnegans Wake*—a tragic failure and a frightful bore.

What about Kafka's work, and Gogol's. I am sniffing about for early influences.

Every Russian writer owes something to Gogol, Pushkin, and Shakespeare. Some Russian writers, as for example Pushkin and Gogol, were influenced by Byron and Sterne in French translation. I do not know German and so could not read Kafka before the nineteen thirties when his *La métamorphose* appeared in *La nouvelle revue française*, and by that time many of my so-called "kafkaesque" stories had

already been published. Alas, I am not one to provide much sport for influence hunters.

Tolstoy said, so they say, that life was a “tartine de merde” which one was obliged to eat slowly. Do you agree?

I've never heard that story. The old boy was sometimes rather disgusting, wasn't he? My own life is fresh bread with country butter and Alpine honey.

Which is the worst thing men do? (Note: I'm thinking of your remark about cruelty).

To stink, to cheat, to torture.

Which is the best?

To be kind, to be proud, to be fearless.

14

On June 26, 1969, Allene Talmey, Associate Editor of *Vogue*, New York, sent me the questions answered below. The interview appeared in the Christmas number of that journal.

Magic, sleight-of-hand, and other tricks have played quite a role in your fiction. Are they for amusement or do they serve yet another purpose?

Deception is practiced even more beautifully by that other V.N., Visible Nature. A useful purpose is assigned by science to animal mimicry, protective patterns and shapes, yet their refinement transcends the crude purpose of mere survival. In art, an individual style is essentially as futile and as organic as a *fata morgana*. The sleight-of-hand you mention is hardly more than an insect's sleight-of-wing. A wit might say that it protects me from half-wits. A grateful spectator is content to applaud the grace with which the masked performer melts into Nature's background.

In your autobiography, Speak, Memory, you describe a series of concurrent, insignificant events around the world "forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events," of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair at Ithaca, New York) is the nucleus.

How does this open out on your larger belief in the precedence of the imagination over the mind?

The simultaneousness of these random events, and indeed the fact of their occurring at all as described by the central percipient, would only then conform to “reality” if he had at his disposal the apparatus to reproduce those events optically within the frame of one screen; but the central figure in the passage you quote is not equipped with any kind of video attached to his lawn chair and must therefore rely on the power of pure imagination. Incidentally, I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of *all* events as a form of impure imagination—hence my inverted commas around “reality.” Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism.

1969 marks the fiftieth anniversary of your first publication. What do that first book and your latest, Ada, have in common? What of your intention and technique has changed, what has remained?

My first publication, a collection of love poems, appeared not fifty, but fifty-three years ago. Several copies of it still lurk in my native country. The versification is fair, the lack of originality complete. Ten years later, in 1926, my first novel, printed abroad, in Russian,* rendered that boyhood romance with a more acceptable glow, supplied, no doubt, by nostalgia, invention, and a dash of detachment. Finally, upon reaching middle age and, with it, a certain degree of precision in the use of my private English, I devoted a chapter of my *Speak, Memory* to the same theme, this time adhering faithfully to the actual past. As to flashes of it in my fiction, I alone can judge if details that look like bits of my “real” self in this or that novel of mine are as authentic as Adam’s rib in the most famous of garden scenes. The

**Mashenka*, translated as *Mary* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1970).

best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style. Only in that light can one properly assess the relationship, if any, between my first heroine and my recent *Ada*. While two ancestral parks may be *generically* alike, true art deals not with the genus, and not even with the species, but with an aberrant individual of the species. Raisins of fact in the cake of fiction are many stages removed from the initial grape. I have accumulated enough aphorisms here to make it seem that your question about *Ada* has been answered.

You are reported to have said that you live more in the future than in the present or past—in spite of your preoccupation with memory. Can you say why this is so?

I do not recall the exact wording of that statement. Presumably I meant that in professional action I look forward, rather than back, as I try to foresee the evolution of the work in progress, try to perceive the fair copy in the crystal of my inkstand, try to read the proof, long before it is printed, by projecting into an imagined section of time the growth of the book, whose every line belongs to the present moment, which in its turn is nothing but the ever rising horizon of the past. Using another, more emotional metaphor, I might concede, however, that I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, sharp shining things, constantly around me, upon me, within me, the way instruments are stuck into the loops and flaps of a mechanic's magnificently elaborate overalls.

You are often superficially linked to a handful of international writers like Beckett and Borges. Do you feel any affinity with them or with your other contemporaries?

Oh, I am well aware of those commentators: slow minds, hasty typewriters! They would do better to link Beckett with Maeterlinck and Borges with Anatole France. It might prove more instructive than gossiping about a stranger.

You have witnessed extraordinary changes in your lifetime and maintained an "esthetic distance." Would you consider this a matter of your temperament or a quality you had to cultivate?

My aloofness is an illusion resulting from my never having belonged to any literary, political, or social coterie. I am a lone lamb. Let me submit, however, that I have bridged the "esthetic distance" in my own way by means of such absolutely final indictments of Russian and German totalitarianism as my novels *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*.

Gogol found a most congenial biographer in you. Whom would you choose, free of time, to be your biographer, and why would you make your choice?

This congeniality is another illusion. I loathe Gogol's moralistic slant, I am depressed and puzzled by his utter inability to describe young women, I deplore his obsession with religion. Verbal inventiveness is not really a bond between authors, it is merely a garland. He would have been appalled by my novels and denounced as vicious the innocent, and rather superficial, little sketch of his life that I produced twenty-five years ago. Much more successful, because based on longer and deeper research, was the life of Chernyshevski (in my novel *The Gift*), whose works I found risible, but whose fate moved me more strongly than did Gogol's. What Chernyshevski would have thought of it is another question—but at least the plain truth of documents is on my side. That, and only that, is what I would ask of my biographer—plain facts, no symbol-searching, no jumping at attractive but preposterous conclusions, no Marxist bunkum, no Freudian rot.

The maps and diagrams—your entomological proof that Gregor Samsa was a dung beetle and not a cockroach—are now well-known artifacts of your teaching literature at Cornell. What other refreshing antidotes to current literary criticism might you suggest?

In my academic days I endeavored to provide students of

literature with exact information about details, about such combinations of details as yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead. In that respect, general ideas are of no importance. Any ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy's attitude toward adultery but in order to enjoy Tolstoy's art the good reader must wish to visualize, for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow–Petersburg night train as it was a hundred years ago. Here diagrams are most helpful. Instead of perpetuating the pretentious nonsense of Homeric, chromatic, and visceral chapter headings, instructors should prepare maps of Dublin with Bloom's and Stephen's intertwining itineraries clearly traced. Without a visual perception of the larch labyrinth in *Mansfield Park* that novel loses some of its stereographic charm, and unless the façade of Dr. Jekyll's house is distinctly reconstructed in the student's mind, the enjoyment of Stevenson's story cannot be perfect.

There is a great deal of easy talk about the "death of language" and the "obsolescence of books." What are your views on the future of literature?

I am not overly preoccupied with tomorrow's books. All I would welcome is that in the future editions of my works, especially in paperback, a few misprints were corrected.

Is it right for a writer to give interviews?

Why not? Of course, in a strict sense a poet, a novelist, is not a public figure, not an exotic potentate, not an international lover, not a person one would be proud to call Jim. I can quite understand people wanting to know my writings, but I cannot sympathize with anybody wanting to know me. As a human specimen, I present no particular fascination. My habits are simple, my tastes banal. I would not exchange my favorite fare (bacon and eggs, beer) for the most misspelt menu in the world. I irritate some of my best friends by the relish with which I list the things I hate—

nightclubs, yachts, circuses, pornographic shows, the soulful eyes of naked men with lots of Guevara hair in lots of places. It may seem odd that such a modest and unassuming person as I should not disapprove of the widespread practice of self-description. No doubt some literary interviews are pretty awful: trivial exchanges between sage and stooge, or even worse, the French kind, starting “*Jeanne Dupont, qui êtes-vous?*” (who indeed!) and sporting such intolerable vulgarisms as “*insolite*” and “*écriture*” (French weeklies, please note!). I do not believe that speaking about myself can encourage the sales of my books. What I really like about the better kind of public colloquy is the opportunity it affords me to construct in the presence of my audience the semblance of what I hope is a plausible and not altogether displeasing personality.

15

During a visit in the last week of August, 1970, Alfred Appel interviewed me again. The result was printed, from our careful jottings, in the spring, 1971, issue of *Novel, A Forum on Fiction*, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

In the twelve years since the American publication of Lolita, you've published twenty-two or so books—new American or Antiterranean novels, old Russian works in English, Lolita in Russian—giving one the impression that, as someone has said—John Updike, I think—your oeuvre is growing at both ends. Now that your first novel has appeared (Mashenka, 1926), it seems appropriate that, as we sail into the future, even earlier works should adhere to this elegant formula and make their quantum leap into English.

Yes, my forthcoming *Poems and Problems* [McGraw-Hill] will offer several examples of the verse of my early youth, including “The Rain Has Flown,” which was composed in the park of our country place, Vyra, in May 1917, the last spring my family was to live there. This “new” volume consists of three sections: a selection of thirty-six Russian poems, presented in the original and in translation; fourteen poems which I wrote directly in English, after 1940 and my arrival in America (all of which were published in *The New*

Yorker); and eighteen chess problems, all but two of which were composed in recent years (the chess manuscripts of the 1940–1960 period have been mislaid and the earlier unpublished jottings are not worth printing). These Russian poems constitute no more than one percent of the mass of verse which I exuded with monstrous regularity during my youth.

Do the components of that monstrous mass fall into any discernible periods or stages of development?

What can be called rather grandly my European period of verse-making seems to show several distinctive stages: an initial one of passionate and commonplace love verse (not represented in *Poems and Problems*); a period reflecting utter distrust of the so-called October Revolution; a period (reaching well into the nineteen-twenties) of a kind of private curatorship, aimed at preserving nostalgic retrospections and developing Byzantine imagery (this has been mistaken by some readers for an interest in “religion” which, beyond literary stylization, never meant anything to me); a period lasting another decade or so during which I set myself to illustrate the principle of making a short poem contain a plot and tell a story (this in a way expressed my impatience with the dreary drone of the anemic “Paris School” of émigré poetry); and finally, in the late thirties, and especially in the following decades, a sudden liberation from self-imposed shackles, resulting both in a sparser output and in a belatedly discovered robust style. Selecting poems for this volume proved less difficult than translating them.

Why are you including the chess problems with the poems?

Because problems are the poetry of chess. They demand from the composer the same virtues that characterize all

worthwhile art: originality, invention, harmony, conciseness, complexity, and splendid insincerity.

Most of your work in Russian [1920–1940] appeared under the name of “Sirin.” Why did you choose that pseudonym?

In modern times *sirin* is one of the popular Russian names of the Snowy Owl, the terror of tundra rodents, and is also applied to the handsome Hawk Owl, but in old Russian mythology it is a multicolored bird, with a woman’s face and bust, no doubt identical with the “siren,” a Greek deity, transporter of souls and teaser of sailors. In 1920, when casting about for a pseudonym and settling for that fabulous fowl, I still had not shaken off the false glamour of Byzantine imagery that attracted young Russian poets of the Blokian era. Incidentally, circa 1910 there had appeared literary collections under the editorial title of *Sirin* devoted to the so-called “symbolist” movement, and I remember how tickled I was to discover in 1952 when browsing in the Houghton Library at Harvard that its catalogue listed me as actively publishing Blok, Bely, and Bryusov at the age of ten.

An arresting phantasmagoric image of Russian émigré life in Germany is that of film extras playing themselves, as it were, as do Ganin in Mashenka and those characters in your story “The Assistant Producer,” whose “only hope and profession was their past—that is, a set of totally unreal people,” who, you write, were hired “to represent ‘real’ audiences in pictures. The dovetailing of one phantasm into another produced upon a sensitive person the impression of living in a Hall of Mirrors, or rather a prison of mirrors, and not even knowing which was the glass and which was yourself.” Did Sirin ever do that sort of work?

Yes, I have been a tuxedoed extra as Ganin had been and that passage in *Mashenka*, retitled *Mary* in the 1970 translation, is a rather raw bit of “real life.” I don’t remember the names of those films.

Did you have much to do with film people in Berlin? *Laughter in the Dark* [1932] suggests a familiarity.

In the middle thirties a German actor whose name was Fritz Kortner, a most famous and gifted artist of his day, wanted to make a film of *Camera Obscura* [Englished as *Laughter in the Dark*]. I went to London to see him, nothing came of it, but a few years later another firm, this one in Paris, bought an option which ended in a blind alley too.

I recall that nothing came of yet another option on Laughter in the Dark when the producer engaged Roger Vadim, circa 1960—Bardot as Margot?—and of course the novel finally reached the no-longer silver screen in 1969, under the direction of Tony Richardson, adapted by Edward Bond, and starring Nicol Williamson and Anna Karina (interesting name, that), the setting changed from old Berlin to Richardson's own mod London. I assume that you saw the movie.

Yes, I did. That name is interesting. In the novel there is a film in which my heroine is given a small part, and I would like my readers to brood over my singular power of prophecy, for the name of the leading lady (Dorianna Karenina) in the picture invented by me in 1931 prefigured that of the actress (Anna Karina) who was to play Margot forty years later in the film *Laughter in the Dark*, which I viewed at a private screening in Montreux.

Are other works headed for the screen?

Yes, *King, Queen, Knave* and *Ada*, though neither is in production yet. *Ada* will be enormously difficult to do: the problem of having a suggestion of fantasy, continually, but never overdoing it. *Bend Sinister* was done on West German television, an opera based on *Invitation to a Beheading* was shown on Danish TV, and my play *The Event* [1938] appeared on Finnish TV.

The German cinema of the twenties and early thirties produced several masterpieces. Living in Berlin, were you impressed by any of the films of the period? Do you today feel any sense of affinity with directors such as Fritz Lang and Josef von Sternberg? The former would have been the ideal director for Despair [1934], the latter, who did The Blue Angel, perfect for Laughter in the Dark and King, Queen, Knave [1928], with its world of decor and decadence. And if only F. W. Murnau, who died in 1931, could have directed The Defense [1930], with Emil Jannings as Luzhin!

The names of Sternberg and Lang never meant anything to me. In Europe I went to the corner cinema about once in a fortnight and the only kind of picture I liked, and still like, was and is comedy of the Laurel and Hardy type. I enjoyed tremendously American comedy—Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Chaplin. My favorites by Chaplin are *The Gold Rush* [1925], *The Circus* [1928], and *The Great Dictator* [1940]—especially the parachute inventor who jumps out of the window and ends in a messy fall which we only see in the expression on the dictator's face. However, today's Little Man appeal has somewhat spoiled Chaplin's attraction for me. The Marx Brothers were wonderful. The opera, the crowded cabin [*A Night at the Opera*, 1935], which is pure genius . . . [Nabokov then lovingly rehearsed the scene in detail, delighting particularly in the arrival of the manicurist.] I must have seen that film three times! Laurel and Hardy are always funny; there are subtle, artistic touches in even their most mediocre films. Laurel is so wonderfully inept, yet so very kind. There is a film in which they are at Oxford [*A Chump at Oxford*, 1940]. In one scene the two of them are sitting on a park bench in a labyrinthine garden and the subsequent happenings conform to the labyrinth. A casual villain puts his hand through the back of the bench and Laurel, who is clasping his hands in an idiotic reverie, mistakes the stranger's hand for one of his own hands, with all kinds of complications

because his own hand is also there. He has to choose. The choice of a hand.

How many years has it been since you saw that movie?

Thirty or forty years. [Nabokov then recalled, again in precise detail, the opening scenes of *County Hospital*, 1932, in which Stan brings a gift of hardboiled eggs to relieve the misery of hospitalized Ollie and consumes them himself, salting them carefully.] More recently, on French TV I saw a Laurel and Hardy short in which the “dubbers” had the atrocious taste to have the two men speak fluent French with an English accent. But I don’t even remember if the best Laurel and Hardy are talkies or not. On the whole, I think what I love about the silent film is what comes through the mask of the talkies and, vice versa, talkies are mute in my memory.

Did you only enjoy American films?

No. Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* [1928] was superb, and I loved the French films of René Clair—*Sous les Toits de Paris* [1929], *Le Million* [1931], *À Nous la Liberté* [1931]—a new world, a new trend in cinema.

*A brilliant but self-effacing critic and scholar has described Invitation to a Beheading [1935–36] as Zamiatin’s We restaged by the Marx Brothers. Is it fair to say that Invitation to a Beheading is in many ways akin to the film comedies we’ve been talking about?**

I can’t make the comparison between a visual impression and my scribble on index cards, which I always see first

*Nabokov’s novels abound in the slapstick elements, the cosmic sight gags, as it were, of Keaton, Clair, Laurel and Hardy, and the

when I think of my novels. The verbal part of the cinema is such a hodgepodge of contributions, beginning with the script, that it really has no style of its own. On the other hand, the viewer of a silent film has the opportunity of adding a good deal of his own inner verbal treasure to the silence of the picture.

Although parts were eventually discarded or revised by Stanley Kubrick, you nevertheless did write the original screenplay for Lolita. Why?

I tried to give it some kind of form which would protect it from later intrusions and distortions. In the case of *Lolita* I

Marx Brothers. *Pale Fire's* kingdom of Zembla recalls the fun-house palace of *Duck Soup* (1933), with its ludicrous functionaries, uniformed guards and mirror walls, as well as the sequence in *A Night at the Opera* in which, managed by Groucho, the others disguise themselves as the three identically bearded Russian aviators, Chicowski, Harpotski, and Baronoff. Witness Kinbote in *Pale Fire*, as King Charles, modestly "lectur[ing] under an assumed name and in a heavy makeup, with wig and false whiskers" (his real, immense, American-grown beard will earn him his sobriquet, The Great Beaver), or the vision of him making his escape from Zembla, abetted by a hundred loyalists who, in a brilliant diversionary ploy, don red caps and sweaters identical to the King's, in their apprehension packing the local prison, which is "much too small for more kings" (shades of *A Night at the Opera's* crowded cabin!). The activities of The Shadows, that regicidal organization of stooges, recall Mack Sennett's Keystone Cops, and The Shadows' grotesque, bumbling, but lethal agent, assassin Gradus, is a vaudevillian, jet-age Angel of Death, imagined as "always streaking across the sky with black traveling bag in one hand and loosely folded umbrella in the other, in a sustained glide high over sea and land." And in *The Defense* (1930), Luzhin's means of suicide is suggested to him by a movie still, lying on a table, showing "a white-faced man with his lifeless features and big American glasses, hanging by his hands from the ledge of a skyscraper—just about to fall off into the abyss"—the most famous scene in Harold Lloyd's *Safety Last* (1923). I trust you have enjoyed this note, to paraphrase a comment made by Kinbote under very different circumstances.

included quite a number of scenes that I had discarded from the novel but still preserved in my desk. You mention one of those scenes in *The Annotated Lolita*—Humbert's arrival in Ramsdale at the charred ruins of the McCoo house. My complete screenplay of *Lolita*, all deletions and emendations restored, will be published by McGraw-Hill in the near future; I want it out before the musical version.

The musical version?

You look disapproving. It's in the best of hands: Alan Jay Lerner will do the adaptation and lyrics, John Barry the music, with settings by Boris Aronson.

I notice that you didn't include W. C. Fields among your favorites.

For some reason his films did not play in Europe and I never saw any in the States, either.

Well, Fields' comedy is more eminently American than the others, less exportable, I suppose. To move from movies to stills, I've noticed that photography is seen negatively (no pun intended, no pun!) in books such as Lolita and Invitation to a Beheading. Are you making a by now traditional distinction between mechanical process and artistic inspiration?

No, I do not make that distinction. The mechanical process can exist in a ludicrous daub, and artistic inspiration can be found in a photographer's choice of landscape and in his manner of seeing it.

You once told me that you were born a landscape painter. Which artists have meant the most to you?

Oh, many. In my youth mostly Russian and French

painters. And English artists such as Turner. The painters and paintings alluded to in *Ada* are for the most part more recent enthusiasms.

The process of reading and rereading your novels is a kind of game of perception, a confrontation of novelistic trompe l'oeil, and in several novels (Pale Fire and Ada among others) you allude to trompe l'oeil painting. Would you say something about the pleasures inherent in the trompe l'oeil school?

A good *trompe l'oeil* painting proves at least that the painter is not cheating. The charlatan who sells his squiggles to *épatér* Philistines does not have the talent or the technique to draw a nail, let alone the shadow of a nail.

What about Cubistic collage? That's a kind of trompe l'oeil.

No, it has none of the poetic appeal that I demand from all art, be it letters or the little music I know.

The art teacher in Pnin says that Picasso is supreme, despite his commercial foibles. Kinbote in Pale Fire likes him too, gracing his rented house with "a beloved early Picasso: earth boy leading rain-cloud horse," and your Kinbotish questioner recalls a reproduction of Picasso's Chandelier, pot et casserole émaillée on your writing desk, 1966 (the same one Kinbote had up on his wall during his reign as King Charles). Which aspects of Picasso do you admire?

The graphic aspect, the masterly technique, and the quiet colors. But then, starting with *Guernica*, his production leaves me indifferent. The aspects of Picasso that I emphatically dislike are the sloppy products of his old age. I also loathe old Matisse. A contemporary artist I do admire very much, though not only because he paints Lolita-like creatures, is Balthus.

How are you progressing with your book on the butterfly in art?

I am still working, at my own pace, on an illustrated *Butterflies in Art* work, from Egyptian antiquity to the Renaissance. It is a purely scientific pursuit. I find an entomological thrill in tracking down and identifying the butterflies represented by old painters. Only recognizable portraits interest me. Some of the problems that might be solved are: were certain species as common in ancient times as they are today? Can the minutiae of evolutionary change be discerned in the pattern of a five-hundred-year-old wing? One simple conclusion I have come to is that no matter how precise an Old Master's brush can be it cannot vie in artistic magic with some of the colored plates drawn by the illustrators of certain scientific works in the nineteenth century. An Old Master did not know that in different species the venation is different and never bothered to examine its structure. It is like painting a hand without knowing anything about its bones or indeed without suspecting it has any. Certain impressionists cannot afford to wear glasses. Only myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance. In high art and pure science detail is everything.

Who are some of the artists who rendered butterflies? Might they not attribute more symbolism to the insect than you do?

Among the many Old Masters who depicted butterflies (obviously netted, or more exactly caged, by their apprentices in the nearest garden) were Hieronymous Bosch (1450–1516), Jan Brueghel (1568–1625), Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Paolo Porpora (1617–1673), Daniel Seghers (1590–1661), and many others. The insect depicted is either part of a still-life (flowers or fruit) arrangement, or more strikingly a live detail in a conventional religious picture (Dürer, Francesco di Gentile, etc.). That in some cases the butterfly symbolizes something (*e.g.*, Psyche) lies utterly outside my area of interest.

In 1968 you told me you hoped to travel to various European museums for research purposes. Have you been doing that?

Yes, that's one reason we've been spending so much time in Italy, and in the future will be traveling to Paris and the Louvre, and to the Dutch museums. We've been to small towns in Italy, and to Florence, Venice, Rome, Milano, Naples, and Pompeii, where we found a very badly drawn butterfly, long and thin, like a Mayfly. There are certain obstacles: still-lives are not very popular today, they are gap-fillers, generally hanging in dark places or high up. A ladder may be necessary, a flashlight, a magnifying glass! My object is to identify such a picture if there are butterflies in it (often it's only "Anonymous" or "School of —"), and get an efficient person to take a photograph. Since I don't find many of those pictures in the regular display rooms I try to find the curator because some pictures may turn up in their stacks. It takes so much time: I tramped through the Vatican Museum in Rome and found only one butterfly, a Zebra Swallowtail, in a quite conventional *Madonna and Child* by Gentile, as realistic as though it were painted yesterday. Such paintings may throw light on the time taken for evolution; one thousand years could show some little change in trend. It's an almost endless pursuit, but if I could manage to collect at least one hundred of these things I would publish reproductions of those particular paintings which include butterflies, and enlarge parts of the picture with the butterfly in life-size. Curiously, the Red Admirable is the most popular; I've collected twenty examples.

That particular butterfly appears frequently in your own work, too. In Pale Fire, a Red Admirable lands on John Shade's arm the minute before he is killed, the insect appears in King, Queen Knave just after you've withdrawn the authorial omniscience—killing the characters, so to speak—and in the final chapter of Speak, Memory, you recall having seen in a Paris park, just

before the war, a live Red Admirable being promenaded on a leash of thread by a little girl. Why are you so fond of Vanessa atalanta?

Its coloring is quite splendid and I liked it very much in my youth. Great numbers of them migrated from Africa to Northern Russia, where it was called "The Butterfly of Doom" because it was especially abundant in 1881, the year Tsar Alexander II was assassinated, and the markings on the underside of its two hind wings seem to read "1881." The Red Admirable's ability to travel so far is matched by many other migratory butterflies.

The painters you admire are for the most part realists, yet it would not be altogether fair to call you a "realist." Should one find this paradoxical? Or does the problem derive from nomenclature?

The problem derives from pigeonholing.

Your youngmanhood coincides with the experimental decade in Russian painting. Did you follow these developments closely at the time, and what were (are) your feelings about, say, Malevich, Kandinsky, or, to choose a more representational artist, Chagall?

I prefer the experimental decade that coincided with my boyhood—Somov, Benois (Peter Ustinov's uncle, you know), Vrubel, Dobuzhinski,* etc. Malevich and Kandinsky mean nothing to me and I have always found Chagall's stuff intolerably primitive and grotesque.

Always?

Well, relatively early works such as *The Green Jew* and *The Promenade* have their points, but the frescoes and windows he now contributes to temples and the Parisian Opera House *plafond* are coarse and unbearable.

*Who, ca. 1912–13, was young Nabokov's drawing master; see *Speak, Memory*, pp. 92–94, and 236.

What of Tchelitchew, whose Hide and Seek (another version of Speak, Memory's Find What the Sailor Has Hidden?) in part describes the experience of reading one of your novels?

I know Tchelitchew's work very little.

The latter artist recalls the Ballets Russes. Were you at all acquainted with that circle, painters as well as dancers and musicians?

My parents had many acquaintances who painted and danced and made music. Our house was one of the first where young Shalyapin sang, and I have foxtrotted with Pavlova in London half a century ago.

Mr. Hilton Kramer, in a recent article in the Sunday New York Times (May 3, 1970) writes, "The accomplishments of at least two living artists who are widely regarded as among the greatest of their time—George Balanchine and Vladimir Nabokov—are traceable, despite the changes of venue and language and outlook, to the esthetic dream that nourished Diaghilev and the artists he gathered around him in St. Petersburg in the nineties." This is, I suppose, what Mary McCarthy meant when she characterized Pale Fire as a "Fabergé gem." Are these analogies just?

I was never much interested in the ballet. "Fabergé gems" I have dealt with in *Speak, Memory* (Chapter Five, p. 111).^{*} Balanshin, not Balanchine (note the other mistranslations). I am at a loss to understand why the names of most of the people with whom I am paired begin with a B.

All of which brings to mind another outspoken émigré, Mr. Stravinsky. Have you had any associations with him?

^{*}There the memoirist recalls a morning tour of St. Petersburg with his governess, the majestic Mademoiselle: "We drift past the show windows of Fabergé whose mineral monstrosities, jeweled troykas poised on marble ostrich eggs, and the like, highly appreciated by the imperial family, were emblems of grotesque garishness to ours.

I know Mr. Stravinski very slightly and have never seen any genuine sample of his outspokenness in print.

Whom in Parisian literary circles did you meet in the thirties, in addition to Joyce and the editorial board of Mesures?

I was on friendly terms with the poet Jules Supervielle. Him and Jean Pauhan (editor of *Nouvelle revue française*) I especially remember.

Did you know Samuel Beckett in Paris?

No, I did not. Beckett is the author of lovely novellas and wretched plays in the Maeterlinck tradition. The trilogy is my favorite, especially *Molloy*. There is an extraordinary scene in which he is crawling through a forest by dragging himself, by catching the crook of his walking stick, his crutch, in the vegetation before him, and pulling himself up, wearing three overcoats and newspaper underneath them. Then there are those pebbles, which he is busily transferring from pocket to pocket. Everything is so gray, so uncomfortable, you feel that he is in constant bladder discomfort, as old people sometimes are in their dreams. In this abject condition there is no doubt some likeness with Kafka's physically uncomfortable and dingy men. It is that limpness that is so interesting in Beckett's work.

Beckett has also composed in two tongues, has overseen the Englishing of his French works. In which language have you read him?

I've read him in both French and English. Beckett's French is a schoolmaster's French, a preserved French, but in English you feel the moisture of verbal association and of the spreading live roots of his prose.

I have a "theory" that the French translation of Despair (1939)—not to mention the books she could have read in Russian—exerted a great influence on the so-called New Novel. In his Preface to Mme. Sarraute's Portrait d'un inconnu (1947), Sartre includes you among the antinovelists, a rather more intelligent remark—don't you think?—than his comments of eight years before when, reviewing Despair, he said that as an émigré writer—landless—you had no subject matter. "But what is the question?" you might ask at this point. Is Nabokov precursor of the French New Novel?

Answer: The French New Novel does not really exist apart from a little heap of dust and fluff in a fouled pigeonhole.

But what do you think of Sartre's remark?

Nothing. I'm immune to any kind of opinion and I just don't know what an "anti-novel" is specifically. Every original novel is "anti-" because it does not resemble the genre or kind of its predecessor.

I know that you admire Robbe-Grillet. What about some of the others loosely grouped under the "New Novel" tag: Claude Simon? Michel Butor? and Raymond Queneau, a wonderful writer, who, while not a member of l'école, anticipates it in several ways?

Queneau's *Exercices de style* is a thrilling masterpiece and, in fact, one of the greatest stories in French literature.* I am also very fond of Queneau's *Zazie*, and I remember some excellent essays he published in *Nouvelle revue française*. We

*Nabokov's encomium is not without humor, however, since Queneau's *Exercices* is an anti-story, if not novel: a man is jostled on a bus and is later advised by a friend to add a button to his overcoat, and this "story," such as it is, is retold ninety-nine different times and ways, none of which is as "thrilling" as, say, an episode in James Bond.

met once at a party and talked about another famous *fillette*. I do not care for Butor. But Robbe-Grillet is so unlike the others. One cannot, one should not lump them together. By the way, when we visited Robbe-Grillet, his petite, pretty wife, a young actress, had dressed herself *à la gamine* in my honor, pretending to be Lolita, and she continued the performance the next day, when we met again at a publisher's luncheon in a restaurant. After pouring wine for everyone but her, the waiter asked, "*Voulez-vous un Coca-Cola, Mademoiselle?*" It was very funny, and Robbe-Grillet, who looks so solemn in his photographs, roared with laughter.

Someone has called the New Novel "the detective story taken seriously" (there it is again, the influence of the French edition of Despair). Parodistic or not, you take it "seriously," given the number of times you've transmuted the properties of the genre. Would you say something about why you've returned to them so often?

My boyhood passion for the Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown stories may yield some twisted clue.

You once said that Robbe-Grillet's shifts of levels belong to psychology—"psychology at its best." Are you a psychological novelist?

All novelists of any worth are psychological novelists, I guess. Speaking of precursors of the New Novel, there is Franz Hellens, a Belgian, who is very important. Do you know of him?

No, I don't. When was he active, in which period did he write?
The post-Baudelaire period.*

*Nabokov is of course funning the academic proclivity to assign individual artists or writers to neatly, arbitrarily defined "periods,"

Could you be more specific?

Hellens was a tall, lean, quiet, very dignified man of whom I saw a good deal in Belgium in the middle thirties when I was reading my own stuff in lecture halls for large émigré audiences. *La femme partagée* (1929), a novel, I like particularly, and there are three or four other books that stand out among the many that Hellens wrote. I tried to get someone in the States to publish him—Laughlin, perhaps—but nothing came of it. Hellens would get excellent reviews, was beloved in Belgium, and what friends he had in Paris tried to brighten and broaden his reputation. It is a shame that he is read less than that awful Monsieur Camus and even more awful Monsieur Sartre.

What you say about Hellens and Queneau is most interesting, in part because journalists always find it more “colorful” to stress your negative remarks about other writers.

Yes, “good copy” is the phrase. As a private person, I happen to be good-natured, straightforward, plain-spoken, and intolerant of bogus art. A writer for whom I have the deepest admiration is H. G. Wells, especially his romances: *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Country of the Blind*, *The War of the Worlds*, and the moon fantasia *The First Men on the Moon*.

“schools,” and “-isms” (“there is only one school, that of talent,” he says), but his answer turns out to be a sound one. Baudelaire spent the last few years of his life in Belgium, and Hellens was born there in 1881, only 14 years after Baudelaire’s death. Now in his ninetieth year, Hellens does indeed embody “the post-Baudelaire period.” Hellens’ vast *oeuvre* includes eight novels and fourteen volumes of verse. A 1931 volume includes a portrait drawing of him by Modigliani. His *Poésie Complète* was published in 1959, his most recent book, *Objets*, in 1966. The *Nouveau Larousse Universel*, Vol. I (1969), includes a brief entry on him. Nabokov has not seen Hellens for many years. In 1959 he sent Nabokov a presentation copy of his novel, *Oeil-de-Dieu*, warmly inscribed “To the Author of *Lolita*.”

And as final food for thought, sir, what is the meaning of life? [A rather blurry reproduction of Tolstoy's photographed face follows this question in the interviewer's typescript].

For solutions see p. 000 (thus says a MS note in the edited typescript of my *Poems and Problems* which I have just received). In other words: Let us wait for the page proof.

16

A second exchange with Alden Whitman took place in mid-April, 1971, and was reproduced, with misprints and other flaws, in *The New York Times*, April 23.

You, sir, will be seventy-two in a few days, having exceeded the Biblical three score and ten. How does this feat, if it is a feat, impress you?

“Three score and ten” sounded, no doubt, very venerable in the days when life expectancy hardly reached one half of that length. Anyway, Petersburgan pediatricians never thought I might perform the feat you mention: a feat of lucky endurance, of paradoxically detached will power, of good work and good wine, of healthy concentration on a rare bug or a rhythmic phrase. Another thing that might have been of some help is the fact that I am subject to the embarrassing qualms of superstition: a number, a dream, a coincidence can affect me obsessively—though not in the sense of absurd fears but as fabulous (and on the whole rather bracing) scientific enigmas incapable of being stated, let alone solved.

Has your life thus far come up to expectations you had for yourself as a young man?

My life thus far has surpassed splendidly the ambitions of boyhood and youth. In the first decade of our dwindling

century, during trips with my family to Western Europe, I imagined, in bedtime reveries, what it would be like to become an exile who longed for a remote, sad, and (right epithet coming) unquenchable Russia, under the eucalypti of exotic resorts. Lenin and his police nicely arranged the realization of *that* fantasy. At the age of twelve my fondest dream was a visit to the Karakorum range in search of butterflies. Twenty-five years later I successfully sent myself, in the part of my hero's father (see my novel *The Gift*) to explore, net in hand, the mountains of Central Asia. At fifteen I visualized myself as a world-famous author of seventy with a mane of wavy white hair. Today I am practically bald.

If birthday wishes were horses, what would yours be for yourself?
Pegasus, only Pegasus.

You are, I am told, at work on a new novel. Do you have a working title? And could you give me a precis of what it is all about?

The working title of the novel I am composing now is *Transparent Things*, but a precis would be an opaque shadow. The façade of our hotel in Montreux is being repainted, and I have reached the ultimate south of Portugal in an effort to find a quiet spot (*pace* the booming surf and rattling wind) where to write. This I do on scrambled index cards (my text existing already there in invisible lead) which I gradually fill in and sort out, using up in the process more pencil sharpeners than pencils; but I have spoken of this in several earlier questionnaires—a word whose spelling I have to look up every time; my traveling companion, Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1970, defines, by the way, "Quassia" as derived from "Quassi," a Surinam Negro slave of the 18th century, who discovered a remedy for worms in white children. On the other hand, none of my own coinages or reapplications appears in this

lexicon—neither “iridule” (a mother-of-pearl cloudlet in *Pale Fire*), nor “racemosa” (a kind of bird cherry), nor several prosodic terms such as “scud” and “tilt” (see my Commentary to *Eugene Onegin*).

There has been a variety of critical reaction to Ada. Which critics, in your views, have been especially perceptive, and why?

Except for a number of helpless little hacks who were unable to jog beyond the first chapters, American reviewers have been remarkably perceptive in regard to my most cosmopolitan and poetic novel. As to the British press, the observations of a few discerning critics were also most welcome; the buffoons turned out to be less clever than usual, whilst my regular spiritual guide, Mr. Philip Toynbee, seemed even more distressed by *Ada* than he had been by *Pale Fire*. I am bad at remembering reviews in detail, and for the moment several mountain chains separate me from my files, but generally speaking my wife and I have long stopped stuffing clippings into forgettable boxes, instead of which an efficient secretary pastes them in huge comfortable albums, with the result that I am informed better than before of current gloss and gossip. In direct answer to your question I would say that the main favor I ask of the serious critic is sufficient perceptiveness to understand that whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception.

Your novel Mary is having a success in the United States. What have been your feelings about seeing in print a novel of so long ago in an English version?

In my preface to the English translation of my first Russian novel, written forty-eight years ago, I point out the nature of the similarities between the author’s first love affair in 1915 and that of Ganin who recalls it as his own in

the stylized world of my *Mashenka*. Owing perhaps to my having gone back to that young romance in my autobiography begun in the nineteen forties (that is, at the centerpoint of the span separating *Mashenka* from *Mary*), the strangeness of the present resurrection cannot help losing something of its thrill. Yet I do feel another, more abstract though no less grateful, tingle when I tell myself that destiny not only preserved a fragile find from decay and oblivion, but allowed me to last long enough to supervise the unwrapping of the mummy.

If you were writing the "book" for Lolita as a musical comedy, what would you select as the main comic point?

The main comic point would have been my trying to do it myself.

17

Israel Shenker sent me his questions on June 10, 1971, three weeks before coming to see me here in Montreux. My written answers were accurately reproduced in *The New York Times Book Review*, January 9, 1972. Their presentation would have been perfect had they not been interspersed with unnecessary embellishment (chitchat about living writers, for instance).

What do you do to prepare yourself for the ordeals of life?

Shave every morning before bath and breakfast so as to be ready to fly far at short notice.

What are the literary virtues you seek to attain—and how?

Mustering the best words, with every available lexical, associative, and rhythmic assistance, to express as closely as possible what one wants to express.

What are the literary sins for which you could be answerable some day—and how would you defend yourself?

Of having spared in my books too many political fools and intellectual frauds among my acquaintances. Of having been too fastidious in choosing my targets.

What is your position in the world of letters?

Jolly good view from up here.

What problems are posed for you by the existence of ego?

A linguistic problem: the singular act of mimetic evolution to which we owe the fact that in Russian the word *ego* means "his," "him."

What struggles these days for pride of place in your mind?

Meadows. A meadow with Scarce Heath butterflies in North Russia, another with Grinnell's Blue in Southern California. That sort of thing.

What are your views about man's upward climb from slime?

A truly remarkable performance. Pity, though, that some of the slime still sticks to drugged brains.

What should we think about death?

"Leave me alone, says dreary Death" (bogus inscription on empty tomb).

What kinds of power do you favor, and which do you oppose?

To play safe, I prefer to accept only one type of power: the power of art over trash, the triumph of magic over the brute.

What are the large issues that you can't get interested in, and what are you most concerned with?

The larger the issue the less it interests me. Some of my best concerns are microscopic patches of color.

What can (should?) we do about elusive truth?

One can (and should) engage a specially trained proof-reader to make sure that misprints and omissions do not disfigure the elusive truth of an interview that a newspaper takes the trouble to conduct with an author who is rather particular about the precise reproduction of his phrase.

18

On September 8, 1971, Paul Sufrin came here to conduct a radio interview for *Swiss Broadcast, European & Overseas Service*. I do not know when, or if, our rather odd colloquy was used. Here are a few samples.

You've been quoted as saying that in a first-rate work of fiction, the real clash isn't between the characters, but between the author and the world. Would you explain this?

I believe I said "between the author and the reader," not "the world," which would be a meaningless formula, since a creative artist makes his own world or worlds. He clashes with readerdom because he is his own ideal reader and those other readers are so very often mere lip-moving ghosts and amnesiacs. On the other hand, a good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled.

What is your particular clash?

Well, that's the clash I am generally faced with.

In many of your writings, you have conceived what I consider to be an Alice-in-Wonderland world of unreality and illusion. What is the connection with your real struggle with the world?

Alice in Wonderland is a specific book by a definite author with its own quaintness, its own quirks, its own quiddity.

If read very carefully, it will be seen to imply, by humorous juxtaposition, the presence of a quite solid, and rather sentimental, world, behind the semi-detached dream. Moreover, Lewis Carroll liked little girls. I don't.

The mixture of unreality and illusion may have led some people to consider you mystifying and your writing full of puzzles. What is your answer to people who say you are just plain obscure?

To stick to the crossword puzzle in their Sunday paper.

Do you make a point of puzzling people and playing games with readers?

What a bore that would be!

The past figures prominently in some of your writing. What concern do you have for the present and the future?

My conception of the texture of time somewhat resembles its image in Part Four of *Ada*. The present is only the top of the past, and the future does not exist.

What have you found to be the disadvantages of being able to write in so many languages?

The inability to keep up with their ever-changing slang.

What are the advantages?

The ability to render an exact nuance by shifting from the language I am now using to a brief burst of French or to a soft rustle of Russian.

What do you think of critic George Steiner's linking you with Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges as the three figures of probable genius in contemporary fiction?

That playwright and that essayist are regarded nowadays with such religious fervor that in the triptych you mention, I would feel like a robber between two Christs. Quite a cheerful robber, though.

19

In October, 1971, Kurt Hoffman visited me in Montreux to film an interview for the *Bayerischer Rundfunk*. Of its many topics and themes I have selected a few for reproduction in this volume. The bit about my West European ancestors comes from a carefully executed and beautifully bound *Abnental*, given me on my seventieth birthday by my German publisher Heinrich Maria Ledig-Rowohlt.

ON TIME AND ITS TEXTURE

We can imagine all kinds of time, such as for example “applied time”—time applied to events, which we measure by means of clocks and calendars; but those types of time are inevitably tainted by our notion of space, spatial succession, stretches and sections of space. When we speak of the “passage of time,” we visualize an abstract river flowing through a generalized landscape. Applied time, measurable illusions of time, are useful for the purposes of historians or physicists, they do not interest me, and they did not interest my creature Van Veen in Part Four of my *Ada*.

He and I in that book attempt to examine the *essence of Time*, not its lapse. Van mentions the possibility of being “an amateur of Time, an epicure of duration,” of being able to delight sensually in the texture of time, “in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its

grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum." He also is aware that "Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors."

Time, though akin to rhythm, is not simply rhythm, which would imply motion—and Time does not move. Van's greatest discovery is his perception of Time as the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, the narrow and bottomless silence *between* the beats, not the beats themselves, which only embar Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat.

PERSONAL PAST

Pure Time, Perceptual Time, Tangible Time, Time free of content and context, this, then, is the kind of Time described by my creature under my sympathetic direction. The Past is also part of the tissue, part of the present, but it looks somewhat out of focus. The Past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is to pick out and try to retain those patches of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events. The bad memoirist re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist, on the other hand, does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail. One of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color.

ANCESTRAL PAST

It follows that the combination and juxtaposition of remembered details is a main factor in the artistic process of

reconstructing one's past. And that means probing not only one's personal past but the past of one's family in search of affinities with oneself, previews of oneself, faint allusions to one's vivid and vigorous Now. This, of course, is a game for old people. Tracing an ancestor to his lair hardly differs from a boy's search for a bird's nest or for a ball lost in the grass. The Christmas tree of one's childhood is replaced by the Family Tree.

As the author of several papers on Lepidoptera, such as the "Nearctic Members of the Genus *Lycaeides*," I experience a certain thrill on finding that my mother's maternal grandfather Nikolay Kozlov, who was born two centuries ago and was the first president of the Russian Imperial Academy of Medicine, wrote a paper entitled "On the Coarctation of the Jugular Foramen in the Insane" to which my "Nearctic Members *et cetera*," furnishes a perfect response. And no less perfect is the connection between Nabokov's Pug, a little American moth named after me, and Nabokov's River in Nova Zembla of all places, so named after my great-grandfather, who participated at the beginning of the nineteenth century in an arctic expedition. I learned about these things quite late in life. Talks about one's ancestors were frowned upon in my family; the interdiction came from my father who had a particular loathing for the least speck or shadow of snobbishness. When imagining the information that I could now have used in my memoir, I rather regret that no such talks took place. But it simply was not done in our home, sixty years ago, twelve hundred miles away.

FAMILY TREE

My father Vladimir Nabokov was a liberal statesman, member of the first Russian parliament, champion of justice and law in a difficult empire. He was born in 1870, went into exile in 1919, and three years later, in Berlin, was assassinated by two Fascist thugs while he was trying to

shield his friend Professor Milyukov.

The Nabokov family's estate was adjacent to that of the Rukavishnikovs in the Government of St. Petersburg. My mother Helen (1876–1939) was the daughter of Ivan Rukavishnikov, country gentleman and philanthropist.

My paternal grandfather Dmitri Nabokov (1827–1904) was State Minister of Justice for eight years (1878–1885) under two tsars.

My grandmother's paternal ancestors, the von Korffs, are traceable to the fourteenth century, while on their distaff side there is a long line of von Tiesenhausens, one of whose ancestors was Engelbrecht von Tiesenhausen of Livland who took part, around 1200, in the Third and Fourth Crusades. Another direct ancestor of mine was Can Grande della Scala, Prince of Verona, who sheltered the exiled Dante Alighieri, and whose blazon (two big dogs holding a ladder) adorns Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353). Della Scala's granddaughter Beatrice married, in 1370, Wilhelm Count Oettingen, grandson of fat Bolko the Third, Duke of Silesia. Their daughter married a von Waldburg, and three Waldburgs, one Kittlitz, two Polenzes and ten Osten-Sackens later, Wilhelm Carl von Korff and Eleonor von der Osten-Sacken engendered my paternal grandmother's grandfather, Nicolaus, killed in battle on June 12, 1812. His wife, my grandmother's grandmother Antoinette Graun, was the granddaughter of the composer Carl Heinrich Graun (1701–1759).

BERLIN

My first Russian novel was written in Berlin in 1924—this was *Mary*, in Russian *Mashenka*, and the first translation of any of my books was *Mashenka* in German under the title *Sie kommt—kommt Sie?*, published by Ullstein in 1928. My next seven novels were also written in Berlin and all of them had, entirely or in part, a Berlin background. This is the

German contribution to the atmosphere and production of all my eight Russian novels written in Berlin. When I moved there from England in 1921, I had only a smattering of German picked up in Berlin during an earlier stay in the winter of 1910 when by brother and I went there with a Russian tutor to have our teeth fixed by an American dentist. In the course of my Cambridge University years I kept my Russian alive by reading Russian literature, my main subject, and by composing an appalling quantity of poems in Russian. Upon moving to Berlin I was beset by a panicky fear of somehow flawing my precious layer of Russian by learning to speak German fluently. The task of linguistic occlusion was made easier by the fact that I lived in a closed émigré circle of Russian friends and read exclusively Russian newspapers, magazines, and books. My only forays into the local language were the civilities exchanged with my successive landlords or landladies and the routine necessities of shopping: *Ich möchte etwas Schinken*. I now regret that I did so poorly; I regret it from a cultural point of view. The little I ever did in that respect was to translate in my youth the Heine songs for a Russian contralto—who, incidentally, wanted the musically significant vowels to coincide in fullness of sound, and therefore I turned *Ich grolle nicht* into *Net, zloby net*, instead of the unsingable old version *Ya ne serzbus'*. Later I read Goethe and Kafka *en regard* as I also did Homer and Horace. And of course since my early boyhood I have been tackling a multitude of German butterfly books with the aid of a dictionary.

AMERICA

In America, where I wrote all my fiction in English, the situation was different. I had spoken English with the same ease as Russian, since my earliest infancy. I had already written one English novel in Europe besides translating in

the thirties two of my Russian books. Linguistically, though perhaps not emotionally, the transition was enduring. And in reward of whatever wrench I experienced, I composed in America a few Russian poems which are incomparably better than those of my European period.

LEPIDOPTERA

My actual work on lepidoptera is comprised within the span of only seven or eight years in the nineteen forties, mainly at Harvard, where I was Research Fellow in Entomology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. This entailed some amount of curatorship but most of my work was devoted to the classification of certain small blue butterflies on the basis of their male genitalic structure. These studies required the constant use of a microscope, and since I devoted up to six hours daily to this kind of research my eyesight was impaired for ever; but on the other hand, the years at the Harvard Museum remain the most delightful and thrilling in all my adult life. Summers were spent by my wife and me in hunting butterflies, mostly in the Rocky Mountains. In the last fifteen years I have collected here and there, in North America and Europe, but have not published any scientific papers on butterflies, because the writing of new novels and the translating of my old ones encroached too much on my life: the miniature hooks of a male butterfly are nothing in comparison to the eagle claws of literature which tear at me day and night. My entomological library in Montreux is smaller, in fact, than the heaps of butterfly books I had as a child.

I am the author or the reviser of a number of species and subspecies mainly in the New World. The author's name, in such cases, is appended in Roman letters to the italicized name he gives to the creature. Several butterflies and one moth have been named for me, and in such cases my name

is incorporated in that of the described insect, becoming "*nabokovi*," followed by the describer's name. There is also a genus *Nabokovia* Hemming, in South America. All my American collections are in museums, in New York, Boston, and Ithaca. The butterflies I have been collecting during the last decade, mainly in Switzerland and Italy, are not yet spread. They are still papered, that is kept in little glazed envelopes which are stored in tin boxes. Eventually they will be relaxed in damp towels, then pinned, then spread, and dried again on setting boards, and finally, labeled and placed in the glassed drawers of a cabinet to be preserved, I hope, in the splendid entomological museum in Lausanne.

FAMILY

I have always been an omnivorous consumer of books, and now, as in my boyhood, a vision of the night's lamplight on a bedside tome is a promised treat and a guiding star throughout the day. Other keen pleasures are soccer matches on the TV, an occasional cup of wine or a triangular gulp of canned beer, sunbaths on the lawn, and composing chess problems. Less ordinary, perhaps, is the unruffled flow of a family life which during its long course—almost half a century—has made absolute fools of the bogeys of environment and the bores of circumstance at all stages of our expatriation. Most of my works have been dedicated to my wife and her picture has often been reproduced by some mysterious means of reflected color in the inner mirrors of my books.

It was in Berlin that we married, in April, 1925, in the midst of my writing my first Russian novel. We were ridiculously poor, her father was ruined, my widowed mother subsisted on an insufficient pension, my wife and I lived in gloomy rooms which we rented in Berlin West, in the lean bosoms of German military families; I taught

tennis and English, and nine years later, in 1934, at the dawn of a new era, our only son was born. In the late thirties we migrated to France. My stuff was beginning to be translated, my readings in Paris and elsewhere were well attended; but then came the end of my European stage: in May, 1940, we moved to America.

FAME

Soviet politicians have a rather comic provincial way of applauding the audience that applauds them. I hope I won't be accused of facetious sufficiency if I say in response to your compliments that I have the greatest readers any author has ever had. I see myself as an American writer raised in Russia, educated in England, imbued with the culture of Western Europe; I am aware of the blend, but even the most lucid plum pudding cannot sort out its own ingredients, especially whilst the pale fire still flickers around it. Field, Appel, Proffer, and many others in the USA, Zimmer in Germany, Vivian Darkbloom (a shy violet in Cambridge), have all added their erudition to my inspiration, with brilliant results. I would like to say a lot about my heroic readers in Russia but am prevented from doing so—by many emotions besides a sense of responsibility with which I still cannot cope in any rational way.

SWITZERLAND

Exquisite postal service. No bothersome demonstrations, no spiteful strikes. Alpine butterflies. Fabulous sunsets—just west of my window, spangling the lake, splitting the crimson sun! Also, the pleasant surprise of a metaphorical sunset in charming surroundings.

All Is Vanity

The phrase is a sophism because, if true, it is itself mere “vanity,” and if not then the “all” is wrong. You say that it seems to be my main motto. I wonder if there is really so much doom and “frustration” in my fiction? Humbert is frustrated, that’s obvious; some of my other villains are frustrated; police states are horribly frustrated in my novels and stories; but my favorite creatures, my resplendent characters—in *The Gift*, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, in *Ada*, in *Glory*, et cetera—are victors in the long run. In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride.

20

The New York newspaper for which this interview, conducted by correspondence in 1972, was intended, refused to publish it. My interviewer's questions have been abridged or stylized in the following version.

Critics of Transparent Things seem to have had difficulty in describing its theme.

Its theme is merely a beyond-the-cypress inquiry into a tangle of random destinies. Amongst the reviewers several careful readers have published some beautiful stuff about it. Yet neither they nor, of course, the common criticule discerned the structural knot of the story. May I explain that simple and elegant point?

You certainly may.

Allow me to quote a passage from my first page which baffled the wise and misled the silly: "When we concentrate on a material object . . . the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object." A number of such instances of falling through the present's "tension film" are given in the course of the book. There is the personal history of a pencil. There is also, in a later chapter, the past of a shabby room, where, instead of focusing on Person and the prostitute, the spectral observer drifts down into the middle of the previous century and

sees a Russian traveler, a minor Dostoevski, occupying that room, between Swiss gambling house and Italy.

Another critic has said—

Yes, I am coming to that. Reviewers of my little book made the lighthearted mistake of assuming that seeing through things is the professional function of a novelist. Actually, that kind of generalization is not only a dismal commonplace but is specifically untrue. Unlike the mysterious observer or observers in *Transparent Things*, a novelist is, like all mortals, more fully at home on the surface of the present than in the ooze of the past.

So who is that observer; who are those italicized “we” in the fourteenth line of the novel; who, for goodness’ sake, is the “I” in its very first line?

The solution, my friend, is so simple that one is almost embarrassed to furnish it. But here goes. An incidental but curiously active component of my novel is Mr. R., an American writer of German extraction. He writes English more correctly than he speaks it. In conversation R. has an annoying habit of introducing here and there the automatic “you know” of the German *émigré*, and, more painfully yet, of misusing, garbling, or padding the commonest American cliché. A good specimen is his intrusive, though well meant, admonition in the last line of my last chapter: “Easy, you know, does it, son.”

Some reviewers saw in Mr. R. a portrait or parody of Mr. N.

Exactly. They were led to that notion by mere flippancy of thought because, I suppose, both writers are naturalized U.S. citizens and both happen, or happened, to live in Switzerland. When *Transparent Things* starts, Mr. R. is already dead and his last letter has been filed away in the “repository” in his publisher’s office (see my Chapter Twenty-One). Not only is the surviving writer an incom-

parably better artist than Mr. R., but the latter, in his *Tralatitions*, actually squirts the venom of envy at the infuriatingly smiling Adam von Librikov (Chapter Nineteen), an anagrammatic alias that any child can decode. On the threshold of my novel Hugh Person is welcomed by a ghost or ghosts—by his dead father, perhaps, or dead wife; more probably, by the late Monsieur Kronig, former director of the Ascot Hotel; still more probably by Mr. R.'s phantom. This promises a thriller: whose ghost will keep intruding upon the plot? One thing, however, is quite transparent and certain. As intimated already in this exegesis, it is no other than a discarnate, but still rather grotesque, Mr. R. who greets newly-dead Hugh in the last line of the book.

I see. And what are you up to now, Baron Librikov? Another novel? Memoirs? Cocking a snoot at dunderheads?

Two volumes of short stories and a collection of essays are by now almost completed, and a new wonderful novel has its little foot in the door. As to cocking a snoot at dunderheads, I never do that. My books, all my books, are addressed not to “dunderheads”; not to the cretins who believe that I like long Latinate words; not to the learned loonies who find sexual or religious allegories in my fiction; no, my books are addressed to Adam von L., to my family, to a few intelligent friends, and to all my likes in all the crannies of the world, from a carrel in America to the nightmare depths of Russia.

21

Simona Morini came to interview me on February 3, 1972, in Montreux. Our exchange appeared in *Vogue*, New York, April 15, 1972. Three passages (pp. 200–1, 201–2 and 204), are borrowed, with modifications, from *Speak, Memory*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, N. Y., 1966.

The world has been and is open to you. With your Proustian sense of places, what is there in Montreux that attracts you so?

My sense of places is Nabokovian rather than Proustian. With regard to Montreux there are many attractions—nice people, near mountains, regular mails, headquarters at a comfortable hotel. We dwell in the older part of the Palace Hotel, in its original part really, which was all that existed a hundred and fifty years ago (you can still see that initial inn and our future windows in old prints of 1840 or so). Our quarters consist of several tiny rooms with two and a half bathrooms, the result of two apartments having been recently fused. The sequence is: kitchen, living–dining room, my wife's room, my room, a former kitchenette now full of my papers, and our son's former room, now converted into a study. The apartment is cluttered with books, folders, and files. What might be termed rather grandly a library is a back room housing my published works, and there are additional shelves in the attic whose skylight is much frequented by pigeons and Alpine choughs. I am giving this meticulous description to refute a

distortion in an interview published recently in another New York magazine—a long piece with embarrassing misquotations, wrong intonations, and false exchanges in the course of which I am made to dismiss the scholarship of a dear friend as “pedantry” and to poke ambiguous fun at a manly writer’s tragic fate.

Is there any truth in the rumor that you are thinking of leaving Montreux forever?

Well, there is a rumor that sooner or later *everybody* living now in Montreux will leave it forever.

Lolita is an extraordinary Baedeker of the United States. What fascinated you about American motels?

The fascination was purely utilitarian. My wife used to drive me (Plymouth, Oldsmobile, Buick, Buick Special, Impala—in that order of brand) during several seasons, many thousands of miles every season, for the sole purpose of collecting Lepidoptera—all of which are now in three museums (Natural History in New York City, Comparative Zoology at Harvard, Comstock Hall at Cornell). Usually we spent only a day or two in each motorcourt, but sometimes, if the hunting was good, we stayed for weeks in one place. The main *raison d’être* of the motel was the possibility of walking out straight into an aspen grove with lupines in full bloom or onto a wild mountainside. We also would make many sorties on the way between motels. All this I shall be describing in my next memoir, *Speak On, Memory*, which will deal with many curious things (apart from butterfly lore)—amusing happenings at Cornell and Harvard, gay tussles with publishers, my friendship with Edmund Wilson, et cetera.

You were in Wyoming and Colorado looking for butterflies. What were these places like to you?

My wife and I have collected not only in Wyoming and Colorado, but in most of the states, as well as in Canada.

The list of localities visited between 1940 and 1960 would cover many pages. Each butterfly, killed by an expert nip of its thorax, is slipped immediately into a little glazed envelope, about thirty of which fit into one of the Band-Aid containers which represent, with the net, my only paraphernalia in the field. Captures can be kept, before being relaxed and set, for any number of years in those envelopes, if properly stored. The exact locality and date are written on every envelope besides being jotted down in one's pocket diary. Though my captures are now in American museums, I have preserved hundreds of labels and notes. Here are just a few samples picked out at random:

Road to Terry Peak from Route 85, near Lead, 6500–7000 feet, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, July 20, 1958.

Above Tomboy Road, between Social Tunnel and Bulion Mine, at about 10,500 feet, near Telluride, San Miguel County, W. Colorado, July 3, 1951.

Near Karner, between Albany and Schenectady, New York, June 2, 1950.

Near Columbine Lodge, Estes Park, E. Colorado, about 9000 feet, June 5, 1947.

Soda Mt., Oregon, about 5500 feet, August 2, 1953.

Above Portal, road to Rustler Park, between 5500 and 8000 feet, Chiricahua Mts., Arizona, April 30, 1953.

Fernie, three miles east of Elco, British Columbia, July 10, 1958.

Granite Pass, Bighorn Mts., 8950 feet, E. Wyoming, July 17, 1958.

Near Crawley Lake, Bishop, California, about 7000 feet, June 3, 1953.

Near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, April 21, 1959. Et cetera, et cetera.

Where do you go for butterflies now?

To various good spots in the Valais, the Tessin, the Grisons; to the hills of Italy; to the Mediterranean islands; to the mountains of southern France and so forth. I am

chiefly devoted to European and North American butterflies of high altitudes, and have never visited the Tropics.

The little mountain trains cogwheeling up to alpine meadows, through sun and shade, along rock face or coniferous forest are tolerable in action and delightful in destination, bringing one as they do to the starting point of a day-long hike. My favorite method of locomotion, though, is the cableway, and especially the chairlift. I find enchanting and dreamy in the best sense of the word to glide in the morning sun from valley to timberline in that magic seat, and watch from above my own shadow—with the ghost of a butterfly net in the ghost of a fist—as it keeps gently ascending in sitting profile along the flowery slope below, among dancing Ringlets and skimming Fritillaries. Some day the butterfly hunter will find even finer dream lore when floating upright over mountains, carried by a diminutive rocket strapped to his back.

In the past, how did you usually travel, when you were looking for butterflies? Did you go camping, for instance?

As a youth of seventeen, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, I was seriously planning (being the independent possessor of an inherited fortune) a lepidopterological expedition to Central Asia, and that would have involved naturally a good deal of camping. Earlier, when I was, say, eight or nine, I seldom roamed further than the fields and woods of our country estate near St. Petersburg. At twelve, when aiming at a particular spot half-a-dozen miles or more distant, I would use a bicycle to get there with my net fastened to the frame; but not many forest paths were passable on wheels; it was possible to ride there on horseback, of course, but, because of our ferocious Russian tabanids, one could not leave a horse haltered in a wood for any length of time: my spirited bay almost climbed up the tree it was tied to one day trying to elude them: big fellows with watered-silk eyes and tiger bodies, and gray little runts with an even more painful proboscis,

but much more sluggish: to dispatch two or three of these dingy tipplers with one crush of the gloved hand as they glued themselves to the neck of my mount afforded me a wonderful empathic relief (which a dipterist might not appreciate). Anyway, on my butterfly hunts I always preferred hiking to any other form of locomotion (except, naturally, a flying seat gliding leisurely over the plant mats and rocks of an unexplored mountain, or hovering just above the flowery roof of a rain forest); for when you walk, especially in a region you have studied well, there is an exquisite pleasure in departing from one's itinerary to visit, here and there by the wayside, this glade, that glen, this or that combination of soil and flora—to drop in, as it were, on a familiar butterfly in his particular habitat, in order to see if he has emerged, and if so, how he is doing.

What is your ideal of a splendid grand-hotel?

Absolute quiet, no radio playing behind the wall, none in the lift, no footsteps thudding above, no snores coming from below, no gondoliers carousing across the lane, no drunks in the corridor. I remember one awful little scene (and this was in a five-turret *palace* with the guidebook sign of a red songbird meaning luxury and isolation!). Upon hearing a commotion just outside the door of my bedroom, I poked out my head, while preparing my curse—which fizzled out when I saw what was happening in the passage. An American of the traveling-executive type was staggering about with a bottle of whisky and his son, a boy of twelve or so, was trying to restrain him, repeating: "Please, Dad, please, come to bed," which reminded me of a similar situation in a Chekhov story.

What do you think has changed over the last sixty years in the traveling style? You loved wagons-lits.

Oh, I did. In the early years of this century, a travel agency on Nevski Avenue displayed a three-foot-long

model of an oak-brown international sleeping car. In delicate verisimilitude it completely outranked the painted tin of my clockwork trains. Unfortunately it was not for sale. One could make out the blue upholstery inside, the embossed leather lining of the compartment walls, their polished panels, inset mirrors, tulip-shaped reading lamps, and other maddening details. Spacious windows alternated with narrower ones, single or geminate, and some of these were of frosted glass. In a few of the compartments, the beds had been made.

The then great and glamorous Nord-Express (it was never the same after World War I when its elegant brown became a nouveau-riche blue), consisting solely of such international cars and running but twice a week, connected St. Petersburg with Paris. I would have said: directly with Paris, had passengers not been obliged to change from one train to a superficially similar one at the Russo-German frontier (Verzhbolovo-Eydtkuhnen), where the ample and lazy Russian sixty-and-a-half-inch gauge was replaced by the fifty-six-and-a-half-inch standard of Europe, and coal succeeded birch logs.

In the far end of my mind I can unravel, I think, at least five such journeys to Paris, with the Riviera or Biarritz as their ultimate destination. In 1909, the year I now single out, our party consisted of eleven people and one dachshund. Wearing gloves and a traveling cap, my father sat reading a book in the compartment he shared with our tutor. My brother and I were separated from them by a washroom. My mother and her maid Natasha occupied a compartment adjacent to ours. Next came my two small sisters, their English governess, Miss Lavington (later governess of the Tsar's children), and a Russian nurse. The odd one of our party, my father's valet, Osip (whom, a decade later, the pedantic Bolsheviki were to shoot, because he appropriated our bicycles instead of turning them over to the nation), had a stranger for companion (Féraudi, a well-known French actor).

Gone the panache of steam, gone the thunder and blaze, gone the romance of the railroad. The popular *train rouge* is merely a souped-up tram. As to the European sleeping-cars, they are drab and vulgar now. The "single" I usually take is a stunted compartment with a corner table concealing inadequate toilet facilities (not unlike those in the farcical American "roomette," where to get at the necessary utensil one has to rise and shoulder one's bed like Lazarus). Still, for the person with a past, some faded charm remains clinging to those international sleepers which take you straight from Lausanne to Rome or from Sicily to the Piedmont. True, the dining-car theme is muted; sandwiches and wine are supplied by hawkers between stations; and your plastic breakfast is prepared by an overworked, half-dressed conductor in his grubby cubicle next to the car's malodorous W. C.; yet my childhood moments of excitement and wonder are still brought back by the mystery of sighing stops in the middle of the night or by the first morning glimpse of rocks and sea.

What do you think of the super-planes?

I think their publicity department, when advertising the spaciousness of the seat rows, should stop picturing impossible children fidgeting between their imperturbed mother and a gray-templed stranger trying to read. Otherwise, those great machines are masterpieces of technology. I have never flown across the Atlantic, but I have had delightful hops with Swissair and Air France. They serve excellent liquor and the view at low elevations is heartbreakingly lovely.

What do you think about luggage? Do you think it has lost style, too?

I think good luggage is always handsome and there is a lot of it around nowadays. Styles, of course, have changed. No longer with us is the kind of elephantine wardrobe

trunk, a specimen of which appears in the visually pleasant but otherwise absurd cinema version of Mann's mediocre, but anyway plausible, *Death in Venice*. I still treasure an elegant, elegantly scuffed piece of luggage once owned by my mother. Its travels through space are finished, but it still hums gently through time for I use it to keep old family letters and such curious documents as my birth certificate. I am a couple of years younger than this antique valise, fifty centimeters long by thirty-six broad and sixteen high, technically a heavyish *nécessaire de voyage* of pigskin, with "H.N." elaborately interwoven in thick silver under a similar coronet. It had been bought in 1897 for my mother's wedding trip to Florence. In 1917 it transported from St. Petersburg to the Crimea and then to London a handful of jewels. Around 1930, it lost to a pawnbroker its expensive receptacles of crystal and silver leaving empty the cunningly contrived leathern holders on the inside of the lid. But that loss has been amply recouped during the thirty years it then traveled with me—from Prague to Paris, from St. Nazaire to New York and through the mirrors of more than two hundred motel rooms and rented houses, in forty-six states. The fact that of our Russian heritage the hardest survivor proved to be a traveling bag is both logical and emblematic.

What is a "perfect trip" for you?

Any first walk in any new place—especially a place where no lepidopterist has been before me. There still exist unexplored mountains in Europe and I still can walk twenty kilometers a day. The ordinary stroller might feel on sauntering out a twinge of pleasure (cloudless morning, village still asleep, one side of the street already sunlit, should try to buy English papers on my way back, here's the turn, I believe, yes, footpath to Cataratta), but the cold of the metal netstick in my right hand magnifies the pleasure to almost intolerable bliss.

22

This interview, conducted by a docile anonym, is preserved in a fragmentary transcript dated October, 1972.

There are two Russian books on which I would like you to comment. The first is Dr. Zhivago. I understand you never wished to review it?

Some fifteen years ago, when the Soviets were hypocritically denouncing Pasternak's novel (with the object of increasing foreign sales, the results of which they would eventually pocket and spend on propaganda abroad); when the badgered and bewildered author was promoted by the American press to the rank of an iconic figure; and when his *Zhivago* vied with my *Lalage* for the top rungs of the best-seller's ladder; I had the occasion to answer a request for a review of the book from Robert Bingham of *The Reporter*, New York.

And you refused?

Oh, I did, The other day I found in my files a draft of that answer, dated at Goldwin Smith Hall, Ithaca, N.Y., November 8, 1958. I told Bingham that there were several reasons preventing me from freely expressing my opinion in print. The obvious one was the fear of harming the author. Although I never had much influence as a critic, I could well imagine a pack of writers emulating my "eccen-

tric" outspokenness and causing, in the long run, sales to drop, thus thwarting the Bolsheviks in their hopes and making their hostage more vulnerable than ever. There were other reasons—but I certainly left out of consideration one point that might have made me change my mind and write that devastating review after all—the exhilarating prospect of seeing it attributed to competitive chagrin by some ass or goose.

Did you tell Robert Bingham what you thought of Dr. Zhivago?

What I told him is what I still think today. Any intelligent Russian would see at once that the book is pro-Bolshevist and historically false, if only because it ignores the Liberal Revolution of spring, 1917, while making the saintly doctor accept with delirious joy the Bolshevik *coup d'état* seven months later—all of which is in keeping with the party line. Leaving out politics, I regard the book as a sorry thing, clumsy, trivial, and melodramatic, with stock situations, voluptuous lawyers, unbelievable girls, and trite coincidences.

Yet you have a high opinion of Pasternak as a lyrical poet?

Yes, I applauded his getting the Nobel Prize on the strength of his verse. In *Dr. Zhivago*, however, the prose does not live up to his poetry. Here and there, in a landscape or simile, one can distinguish, perhaps, faint echoes of his poetical voice, but those occasional *fioriture* are insufficient to save his novel from the provincial banality so typical of Soviet literature for the past fifty years. Precisely that link with Soviet tradition endeared the book to our progressive readers. I deeply sympathized with Pasternak's predicament in a police state; yet neither the vulgarities of the *Zhivago* style nor a philosophy that sought refuge in a sickly sweet brand of Christianity could ever transform that sympathy into a fellow writer's enthusiasm.

The book, however, has become something of a classic. How do you explain its reputation?

Well, all I know is that among Russian readers of today—readers, I mean, who represent that country's wonderful underground intelligentsia and who manage to obtain and distribute works of dissident authors—*Dr. Zhivago* is not prized as universally and unquestioningly as it is, or at least was, by Americans. When the novel appeared in America, her left-wing idealists were delighted to discover in it a proof that “a great book” *could* be produced after all under the Soviet rule. It was for them the triumph of Leninism. They were comforted by the fact that for better or worse its author remained on the side of angelic Old Bolsheviks and that nothing in his book even remotely smacked of the true exile's indomitable contempt for the beastly regime engendered by Lenin.

Let us now turn —

(The fragment stops here)

LETTERS TO EDITORS

- 1 *Playboy* (1961)
- 2 *The London Times* (1962)
- 3 *Encounter* (1966)
- 4 *The Sunday Times* (1967)
- 5 *Encounter* (1967)
- 6 *The New Statesman* (1967)
- 7 *Esquire* (1969)
- 8 *The New York Times* (1969)
- 9 *Time* (1971)
- 10 *The New York Times Book Review* (1971)
- 11 *The New York Times Book Review* (1972)

1

TO THE EDITOR OF *PLAYBOY*

published July, 1961

The amusing memoir by Maurice Girodias (*Pornologist on Olympus*, *Playboy*, April) contains a number of inaccuracies. My correspondence with Mr. Girodias, and with my literary agent about Mr. Girodias, will soon be published in an appendix to a full account of *Lolita's* tribulations, and will demonstrate what caused the "deterioration" of our relations and reveal which of us was "so absorbed by the financial aspect of the nymphet phenomenon" as to be "blinded to other realities." Here I shall limit myself to the discussion of only one of Mr. Girodias' delusions. I wish to refute Mr. Girodias' bizarre charge that I was aware of his presence at the Gallimard cocktail party in October, 1959. Since I had never met the man, and was not familiar with his face, I could hardly have "identified" him as he "slowly progressed toward" me. I am extremely *distract* (as Humbert Humbert would have put it in his affected manner) and am liable not to make out mumbled presentations, especially in the hubbub and crush of that kind of affair. One can know obscure mythological or historical figures by their attributes and emblems, and had Mr. Girodias appeared in a punning charade, carrying a plate with an author's head, I might have recognized him. But he came plateless, and, while apologizing for my abstraction, I must affirm here

that I did not talk to Mr. Girodias about his brother's translation, or anything else, and that I remained completely and blissfully ignorant of having exchanged a polite grin with the Olympian Pornologist. Incidentally, in the course of describing our fictitious colloquy, Mr. Girodias compares my physical motions to those of a dolphin. This, I admit, is nicely observed. I do, alas, resemble a dolphin—and can do nothing about it, except remark, in conclusion, that Mr. Girodias speaks of those gentle cetaceans with the frightening appetite of an elasmobranch fish.

Nice, France

2

TO THE EDITOR OF *THE LONDON TIMES*
published May 30, 1962

I find my name listed in the program of the Edinburgh International Festival among those of writers invited to take part in its Writers' Conference. In the same list I find several writers whom I respect but also some others—such as Ilya Ehrenburg, Bertrand Russell, and J. P. Sartre—with whom I would not consent to participate in any festival or conference whatsoever. Needless to say that I am supremely indifferent to the “problems of a writer and the future of the novel” that are to be discussed at the conference.

I would have preferred to bring this to the notice of the Festival Committee in a more private way had I received an invitation to the Conference before my name appeared on its program.

3

TO THE EDITOR OF *ENCOUNTER*

published April, 1966

I am glad that Mr. Fussell has nothing against my notes on prosody provided they remain attached to a work of repelling length and limited appeal. I am amused by his objecting to them when published in the form of a separate, easily available little volume. In my turn, I object to his assuming that my dislike for the French pseudo-classical style as borrowed and reworked by English poets is based "on the eighteenth century's performance in tetrametric verse." Before dragging in Pope's pentameter and Sterne's prose in redemption of a literary era, he should have looked up what I say about Pope and Sterne in my *Eugene Onegin* commentary. I do not know who "Baron Corvo" and (Professor?) Firbank are, or what bearing "Camp" (Campus?) products have on the texture of tetrameters; but I am quite certain that there is no connection between random samples of tetrametric rhythms as discussed in a serious study and what Mr. Fussell comically calls "the overtones of the English Protestant sense of duty." The presence or absence of scuds in a given passage may often be accidental but only a Philistine can assert that the accidental is "undiscussable." If Mr. Fussell is puzzled by my having had to invent terms for new or unfamiliar concepts, it only means that he has not understood my explanations and examples. The purpose of my little investigation was to describe (*not* to "interpret") certain aspects of verse structure. I suspected that my views would irritate the conservative professional in his fondly tilled field, but I was hardly prepared for the sparkling flow of academic kitsch with which Mr. Fussell now regales me.

4

TO THE EDITOR OF *THE SUNDAY
TIMES*, LONDON

published January 1, 1967

I strongly object to the remark in “The Red Letter Forgers” (December 18, 1966) about my father who, according to your four investigators, was shot by a monarchist because “he was suspected of being too Left-wing.” This nonsense is distasteful to me for several reasons: it is remarkably similar to the glib data distorting truth in Soviet sources; it implies that the chieftains of the Russian emigration were bandits; and the reason it gives for the murder is false.

My father had been one of the leaders of the Constitutional-Democratic party in Russia long before the Revolution, and his articles in the émigré *Rul*—the only influential Russian-language daily in Berlin—merely continued the strain of West European liberalism, in the large sense, that had marked his life since at least 1904.

Although there could be found a number of decent elderly persons among the Russian monarchists in Berlin and Paris, there were no original minds or influential personalities among them. The stauncher reactionaries, Black Hundred groups, votaries of new and better dictatorships, shady journalists who claimed that Kerenski’s real name was Kirschbaum, budding Nazis, blooming Fascists, pogromystics, and *agents-provocateurs*, remained on the lurid fringe of Russian expatriation and were not representative in any way of the liberal intelligentsia, which was the backbone and marrow of émigré culture, a fact deliberately played down by Soviet historians; and no wonder: it was that liberal cultural core, and certainly not the crude and ambiguous activities of extreme rightists, that formed a genuine anti-Bolshevist opposition (still working today),

and it was people like my father who pronounced the first and final verdict on the Soviet police state.

The two sinister ruffians who attacked P. N. Milyukov at a public lecture in Berlin on March 28, 1922, had planned to assassinate him, not my father; but it was my father who shielded his old friend from their pistol bullets and while vigorously knocking down one of the assailants was fatally shot by the other.

I wish to submit that at a time when in so many eastern countries history has become a joke, this precise beam of light upon a precious detail may be of some help to the next investigator.

5

TO THE EDITOR OF *ENCOUNTER*
published February, 1967

Sir,

I welcome Freud's "Woodrow Wilson" not only because of its comic appeal, which is great, but because that surely must be the last rusty nail in the Viennese Quack's coffin.

6

TO THE EDITOR OF *THE NEW STATESMAN*
Pushkin and Byron
published November 17, 1967

Sir,

Mr. Pritchett (NS, 27 Oct.) says he would have liked Mr. Magarshack to tell him in what language Pushkin read

Byron and other English authors. I do not know Mr. Magarshack's work or works, but I do know that since neither he, nor anybody else, could answer Mr. Pritchett without dipping into me, a vicious spiral is formed with an additional coy little coil supplied by Mr. Pritchett's alluding to the "diverting" article I published in *Encounter* (Feb. 1966). If, however, your reviewer would care to combine the diverting with the instructive I suggest he consult the pages (enumerated in the index to my work on *Eugene Onegin* under Pushkiniana, English) wherein I explain, quite clearly, that most Russians of Pushkin's time, including Pushkin himself, read English authors in French versions.

By a pleasing coincidence the same issue of your journal contains another item worth straightening out. Mr. Desmond MacNamara, writing on a New Zealand novel, thinks that there should be coined a male equivalent of "nymphet" in the sense I gave it. He is welcome to my "faunlet," first mentioned in 1955 (*Lolita*, Chapter 5). How time flies! How attention flags!

7

Answer cabled on March 13, 1969, to William Honon who had asked me, for quotation in *Esquire* magazine, what I would like to hear an astronaut say when landing on the moon for the first time.

Published in the July, 1969 issue of Esquire

"I WANT A LUMP IN HIS THROAT TO
OBSTRUCT THE WISECRACK"

8

Answer cabled July 3, 1969, to Thomas Hamilton, who had asked me, for publication in *The New York Times*, what the moon landing means to me. Published *** 1969, with a disastrous misprint in the seventh word.

“TREADING THE SOIL OF THE MOON PALPAT-
ING ITS PEBBLES TASTING THE PANIC AND
SPLENDOR OF THE EVENT FEELING IN THE
PIT OF ONES STOMACH THE SEPARATION
FROM TERRA THESE FORM THE MOST ROMAN-
TIC SENSATION AN EXPLORER HAS EVER
KNOWN”

9

TO THE EDITOR OF *Time* MAGAZINE
published on January 18, 1971

I find highly objectionable the title of the piece (“Profit without Honor,” December 21, 1970) on the musical adaptation of *Lolita* as well as your sermonet on the scruples that I once happened to voice concerning its filming (“ . . . to make a real twelve-year-old girl play such a part would be sinful and immoral. . . .”). When cast in the title role of Kubrick’s neither very sinful nor very immoral picture, Miss Lyon was a well-chaperoned young lady, and I suspect that her Broadway successor will be as old as she was at the time. Fourteen is not twelve, 1970 is not 1958, and the sum of \$150,000 you mention is not correct.

10

TO JOHN LEONARD, EDITOR OF
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
published on November 7, 1971

I seek the shelter of your columns to help me establish the truth in the following case:

A kind correspondent Xeroxed and mailed me pp. 154–162 referring to my person as imagined by Edmund Wilson in his recent work *Upstate*.^{*} Since a number of statements therein wobble on the brink of libel, I must clear up some matters that might mislead trustful readers.

First of all, the “miseries, horrors, and handicaps” that he assumes I was subjected to during forty years before we first met in New York are mostly figments of his warped fancy. He has no direct knowledge of my past. He has not even bothered to read my *Speak, Memory*, the records and recollections of a happy expatriation that began practically on the day of my birth. The method he favors is gleaning from my fiction what he supposes to be actual, “real-life” impressions and then popping them back into my novels and considering my characters in that inept light—rather like the Shakespearian scholar who deduced Shakespeare’s mother from the plays and then discovered allusions to her in the very passages he had twisted to manufacture the lady. What surprises me, however, is not so much Wilson’s aplomb as the fact that in the diary he kept while he was my guest in Ithaca he pictures himself as nursing feelings and ideas so vindictive and fatuous that if expressed they should have made me demand his immediate departure.

A few of the ineptitudes I notice in these pages of *Upstate* are worth considering here. His conviction that my insis-

^{*}*Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York*. 386 pages. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

tence on basic similarities between Russian and English verse is “a part of [my] inheritance of [my] father . . . champion of a constitutional monarchy for Russia after the British model” is too silly to refute; and his muddleheaded and ill-informed description of Russian prosody only proves that he remains organically incapable of reading, let alone understanding, my work on the subject. Equally inconsistent with facts—and typical of his Philistine imagination—is his impression that at parties in our Ithaca house my wife “concentrated” on me and grudged “special attention to anyone else.”

A particularly repulsive blend of vulgarity and naiveté is reflected in his notion that I must have suffered “a good deal of humiliation,” because as the son of a liberal noble I was not “accepted (!) by the strictly illiberal nobility”—where? when, good God?—and by whom exactly, by my uncles and aunts? or by the great grim boyars haunting a plebeian’s fancy?

I am aware that my former friend is in poor health but in the struggle between the dictates of compassion and those of personal honor the latter wins. Indeed, the publication of those “old diaries” (doctored, I hope, to fit the present requirements of what was then the future), in which living persons are but the performing poodles of the diarist’s act, should be subject to a rule or law that would require some kind of formal consent from the victims of conjecture, ignorance, and invention.

TO JOHN LEONARD, EDITOR OF
THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
published March 5, 1972

Puzzled queries from correspondents oblige me to react, with some delay, to the tasteless parody posing as letters (*New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 16, 1972) from “Diron Frieders” and “Mark Hamburg” which I take to be the phony names of one or two facetious undergraduates judging by the style and the piffle. I think, Sir, you would do a service to Mr. Wilson as well as to truth if you were to point out in your next issue that neither he nor I composed those letters.

I might add that I detected in them only one nice point, namely the suggestion that *Schadenfreude*, as used by Mr. Wilson in regard to a special characteristic of mine, really means “hatred of Freud”—but that is poetic justice, not wit.

ARTICLES

- 1 On Hodasevich (1939)
- 2 Sartre's First Try (1949)
- 3 Pounding the Clavichord (1963)
- 4 Reply to My Critics (1966)
- 5 *Lolita* and Mr. Girodias (1967)
- 6 On Adaptation (1969)
- 7 Anniversary Notes (1970)
- 8 Rowe's Symbols (1971)
- 9 Inspiration (1972)
- 10 Five Lepidoptera Papers (1952–1953, 1970)
- 11 On Some Inaccuracies in Klots' *Field Guide* (1952)
- 12 Butterfly Collecting in Wyoming, 1952 (1953)
- 13 *Audubon's* Butterflies, Moths and Other Studies (1952)
- 14 L. C. Higgins and N. D. Riley (1970)

1

ON HODASEVICH

(*Sovremennyya zapiski LIX, Paris 1939*)

This poet, the greatest Russian poet of our time, Pushkin's literary descendant in Tyutchev's line of succession, shall remain the pride of Russian poetry as long as its last memory lives. What makes his genius particularly striking is that it matured in the years of our literature's torpescence, when the Bolshevik era neatly divided poets into established optimists and demoted pessimists, endemic hearties and exiled hypochondriacs; a classification which, incidentally, leads to an instructive paradox: inside Russia the dictate acts from outside; outside Russia, it acts from within. The will of the government which implicitly demands a writer's affectionate attention toward a parachute, a farm tractor, a Red Army soldier, or the participant in some polar venture (*i.e.*, toward this or that externality of the world) is naturally considerably more powerful than the injunction of exile, addressed to man's inner world. The latter precept is barely sensed by the weak and is scorned by the strong. In the nineteen twenties it induced nostalgic rhymes about St. Petersburg's rostral columns, and now, in the late thirties, it has evolved rhymed religious concerns, not always deep but always honest. Art, authentic art, whose object lies next to art's source (that is in lofty and desert places—and certainly not

in the over-populated vale of soulful effusions) has degenerated in our midst to the level, alas, of remedial lyricism; and although one understands that private despair cannot help seeking a public path for its easement, poetry has nothing to do with it: the bosom of the Church or that of the Seine is more competent in these matters. The public path, whatever it looks like, is, artistically, always a paltry one, precisely because of its being public. If, however, one finds hard to imagine a poet, in the confines of Russia, refusing to bend under the yoke (such as, for example, declining to translate a Caucasian poetaster's jingles) and behaving rashly enough to put the muse's liberty above his own, one should expect to find more easily in émigré Russia plucky loners who would not wish to unite and pool their poetical preoccupations in a sort of communistery of the spirit.

Even genius does not save one in Russia; in exile, one is saved by genius alone. No matter how difficult Hodasevich's last years were, no matter how sorely the banality of an émigré's lot irked him, no matter, too, how much the good old indifference of fellow mortals contributed to his mortal extinction, Hodasevich is safely enshrined in timeless Russia. Indeed, he himself was ready to admit, through the hiss of his bilious banter, through the "cold and murk" of the days predicted by Blok,* that he occupied a special position: the blissful solitude of a height others could not attain.

Here I have no intention of hitting bystanders with a swing of the thurible.** A few poets of the émigré genera-

*In verses written by Blok on the eve of our era:

If only you knew, oh children you,
The cold and murk of the coming days

** The metaphor is borrowed from a poem by Baratynski (1800–1844) accusing critics of lauding Lermontov (1814–1841) on the occasion of his death with the unique object of disparaging living poets. Incidentally, the dry little notice accorded to Baratynski in Pavlenkov's encyclopedia (St. Petersburg, 1913) ends with the marvelous misprint: "Complete Works, 1984."

tion are still on their way up and, who knows, may reach the summits of art—if only they do not fritter away life in a second-rate Paris of their own which sails by with a slight list in the mirrors of taverns without mingling in any way with the French Paris, a motionless and impenetrable town. Hodasevich seemed to have sensed in his very fingers the branching influence of the poetry he created in exile and therefore felt a certain responsibility for its destiny, a destiny which irritated him more than it saddened him. The glum notes of cheap verse struck him more as a parody than as the echo of his collection *Evropeyskaya Noch'* (European Night), where bitterness, anger, angels, the gulfs of adjacent vowels—everything, in short, was genuine, unique, and quite unrelated to the current moods which clouded the verse of many of those who were more or less his disciples.

To speak of his *masterstvo*, *Meisterschaft*, “mastery,” *i.e.* “technique,” would be meaningless and even blasphemous in relation to poetry in general, and to his own verse in a sharply specific sense, since the notion of “mastery,” which automatically supplies its own quotation marks, turns thereby into an appendage, a shadow demanding logical compensation in the guise of any positive quantity, and this easily brings us to that peculiar, soulful attitude toward poetry in result of which nothing remains of squashed art but a damp spot or tear stain. This is condemnable not because even the most *purs sanglots* require a perfect knowledge of prosody, language, verbal equipoise; and this is also absurd not because the poetaster intimating in slatternly verse that art dwindles to nought in the face of human suffering is indulging in coy deceit (comparable, say, to an undertaker’s murmuring against human life because of its brevity); no: the split perceived by the brain between the thing and its fashioning is condemnable and absurd because it vitiates the essence of what actually (whatever you call the thing—“art,” “poetry,” “beauty”) is inseparable from all

its mysteriously indispensable properties. In other words, the perfect poem (at least three hundred examples of which can be found in Russian literature) is capable of being examined from all angles by the reader in search of its idea or only its sentiment, or only the picture, or only the sound (many things of that kind can be thought up, from “instrumentation” to “imaginization”), but all this amounts to a random selection of an entity’s facet, none of which would deserve, really, a moment of our attention (nor could it of course induce in us any thrill except, maybe, obliquely, in making us recall some other “entity,” somebody’s voice, a room, a night), had not the poem possessed that resplendent independence in respect of which the term “masterly technique” rings as insultingly as its antonym “winning sincerity.”

What I am saying here is far from being new; yet one is impelled to repeat it when speaking of Hodasevich. There exists not quite exact verse (whose very blurriness can have an appeal of its own like that of lovely nearsighted eyes) which makes a virtue of approximation by the poet’s striving toward it with the same precision in selecting his words as would pass for “mastery” in more picturesque circumstances. Compared to those artful blurrings, the poetry of Hodasevich may strike the gentle reader as an overpolishing of form—I am deliberately using this unappetizing epithet. But the whole point is that his poetry—or indeed any authentic poetry—does not require any definition in terms of “form.”

I find it most odd myself that in this article, in this rapid inventory of thoughts prompted by Hodasevich’s death, I seem to imply a vague non-recognition of his genius and engage in vague polemics with such phantoms as would question the enchantment and importance of his poetry. Fame, recognition—all that kind of thing is a phenomenon of rather dubious shape which death alone places in true perspective. I am ready to assume that there might have

been quite a few people who when reading with interest the weekly critique that Hodasevich wrote for *Vozrozhdenie** (and it should be admitted that his reviews, with all their wit and *allure*, were not on the level of his poetry, for they lacked somehow its throb and magic) simply did not know that the reviewer was also a poet. I should not be surprised if this person or that finds Hodasevich's posthumous fame inexplicable at first blush. Furthermore, he published no poems lately—and readers are forgetful, and our literary critics are too excited and preoccupied by evanescent topical themes to have the time or occasion to remind the public of important matters. Be it as it may, all is finished now: the bequeathed gold shines on a shelf in full view of the future, whilst the goldminer has left for the region from where, perhaps, a faint something reaches the ears of good poets, penetrating our being with the beyond's fresh breath and conferring upon art that mystery which more than anything characterizes its essence.

Well, so it goes, yet another plane of life has been slightly displaced, yet another habit—the habit (one's own) of (another person's) existence—has been broken. There is no consolation, if one starts to encourage the sense of loss by one's private recollections of a brief, brittle, human image that melts like a hailstone on a window sill. Let us turn to the poems.

* An émigré daily in Paris before World War II.

(This article, signed "V. Sirin," the pen-name I used in the twenties and thirties, in Berlin and Paris, appeared in the émigré literary magazine *Sovremennyya zapiski*, LIX, 1939, Paris. I have clung closely to my tortuous Russian text in the present translation into English.)

2

SARTRE'S FIRST TRY

Nausea. By Jean-Paul Sartre. Translated by Lloyd Alexander. 238 pp. New York: New Directions, 1949

Sartre's name, I understand, is associated with a fashionable brand of café philosophy, and since for every so-called "existentialist" one finds quite a few "suctorialists" (if I may coin a polite term), this made-in-England translation of Sartre's first novel, *La Nausée* (published in Paris in 1938) should enjoy some success.

It is hard to imagine (except in a farce) a dentist persistently pulling out the wrong tooth. Publishers and translators, however, seem to get away with something of that sort. Lack of space limits me to only these examples of Mr. Alexander's blunders.

1. The woman who "s'est offert, avec ses économies, un jeune homme" (has bought herself a young husband with her savings) is said by the translator (p. 20) to have "offered herself and her savings" to that young man.

2. The epithets in "*Il a l'air souffreteux et mauvais*" (he looks seedy and vicious) puzzled Mr. Alexander to such an extent that he apparently left out the end of the sentence for somebody else to fill in, but nobody did, which reduced the English text (p. 43) to "he looks."

3. A reference to "*ce pauvre Ghéhenno*" (French writer) is

twisted (p. 163) into "Christ . . . this poor man of Gehenna."

4. The *forêt de verges* (forest of phalli) in the hero's nightmare is misunderstood as being some sort of birchwood.

Whether, from the viewpoint of literature, *La Nausée* was worth translating at all is another question. It belongs to that tense-looking but really very loose type of writing, which has been popularized by many second-raters—Barbusse, Céline, and so forth. Somewhere behind looms Dostoevski at his worst, and still farther back there is old Eugène Sue, to whom the melodramatic Russian owed so much. The book is supposed to be the diary ("Saturday morning," "11.00 P.M."—that sort of dismal thing) of a certain Roquentin, who, after some quite implausible travels, has settled in a town in Normandy to conclude a piece of historical research.

Roquentin shuttles between café and public library, runs into a voluble homosexual, meditates, writes his diary, and finally has a long and tedious talk with his former wife, who is now kept by a suntanned cosmopolitan. Great importance is attached to an American song on the café phonograph: "Some of these days you'll miss me, honey." Roquentin would like to be as crisply alive as this song, which "saved the Jew [who wrote it] and the Negress [who sang it]" from being "drowned in existence."

In an equivocal flash of clairvoyance (p. 235) he visualizes the composer as a clean-shaven Brooklynite with "coal-black eyebrows" and "ringed fingers," writing down the tune on the twenty-first floor of a skyscraper. The heat is terrific. Presently, however, Tom (probably a friend) will come in with his hip flask (local color) and they will take swigs of liquor ("brimming glasses of whisky" in Mr. Alexander's lush version). I have ascertained that in reality the song is a Sophie Tucker one written by the Canadian Shelton Brooks.

The crux of the whole book seems to be the illumination that comes to Roquentin when he discovers that his

“nausea” is the result of the pressure of an absurd and amorphous but very tangible world. Unfortunately for the novel, all this remains on a purely mental level, and the discovery might have been of some other nature, say solipsistic, without in the least affecting the rest of the book. When an author inflicts his idle and arbitrary philosophic fancy on a helpless person whom he has invented for that purpose, a lot of talent is needed to have the trick work. One has no special quarrel with Roquentin when he decides that the world exists. But the task to make the world exist as a work of art was beyond Sartre’s powers.

[*The New York Times Book Review*, when publishing this piece in its issue of April 24, 1949, left out my fourth example of Mr. Alexander’s blunders. From Ithaca, N. Y., where I was teaching at Cornell University, I immediately propelled a fierce telegram accusing the editor of having disfigured my article. On Monday, April 25, I delivered my third and last lecture on Turgenev’s *Fathers and Children*. On Tuesday night we had guests at our dreadfully drafty dacha on steep Seneca Street (Lloyd Alexander would have glossed: Lucius Annaeus). I regaled them with a copy of that violent wire. One of my colleagues, a tense young scholar, observed with a humorless chuckle: “Yes, of course, that’s what you would *want* to have sent, as we all must have wanted in many similar cases.” My retort, I thought, was not unfriendly, but my wife said later I could not have been ruder. On Wednesday I started to analyze, before a torpid class full of vernal languor, Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich*. On Thursday I got a letter from *The New York Times Book Review* explaining their action by “considerations of space.” I have now reinstated the missing passage from a note in my files. I do not know if the editor was sufficiently farsighted to preserve my typescript and telegram. According to the italicized bit at the bottom of the piece: “Mr. Nabokov is the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*”—which had been published by New Directions.]

3

POUNDING THE CLAVICHORD

The author of a soon-to-be-published translation may find it awkward to criticize a just-published version of the same work, but in the present case I can, and should, master my embarrassment; for something must be done, some lone, hoarse voice must be raised, to defend both the helpless dead poet and the credulous college student from the kind of pitiless and irresponsible paraphrast whose product * I am about to discuss.

The task of twisting some five thousand Russian iambic tetrameters, with a rigid pattern of masculine and feminine rhymes, into an equal number of similarly rhymed English iambic tetrameters is a monstrous undertaking, and I who have limited my efforts to a plain, prosy, and rhymeless translation of *Eugene Onegin* feel a certain morbid admiration for Mr. Arndt's perseverance. A sympathetic reader, especially one who does not consult the original, may find in Mr. Arndt's version more or less sustained stretches of lulling poetastry and specious sense; but anybody with less benevolence and more knowledge will see how patchy the passable really is.

* Alexander Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*. A new translation in the Onegin stanza with an introduction and notes by Walter Arndt. A Dutton paperback, New York, 1963.

Let me, first of all, present side by side a literal translation of two stanzas (Six: xxxvi–xxxvii) and Mr. Arndt's version. It is a sample of one of those passages in his work that are free from howlers, and that the passive reader (the pet of progressive educators) might accept as a tolerable translation:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. My friends, you're
sorry for the poet | My friends, you will lament
the poet |
| 2. in the bloom of glad
hopes, | Who, flowering <i>with a happy
gift,</i> |
| 3. not having yet fulfilled
them for the world, | Must wilt before he could
bestow it |
| 4. scarce out of infant
clothes, | Upon the world, <i>yet scarce
adrift</i> |
| 5. withered! Where is the
ardent stir, | <i>From boyhood's shore.</i> Now he
will never |
| 6. the noble aspiration, | Seethe with that generous
endeavor, |
| 7. of young emotions and
young thoughts, | Those <i>storms</i> of mind and
heart again, |
| 8. exalted, tender, bold? | Audacious, tender or <i>hu-
mane!</i> |
| 9. Where are love's turbu-
lent desires, | Stilled now are love's unruly
urges, |
| 10. the thirst for knowl-
edges and work, | The thirst for knowledge
and for <i>deeds,</i> |
| 11. the dread of vice and
shame, | <i>Contempt</i> for vice and <i>what it
breeds,</i> |
| 12. and you, fond musings, | And stilled you too, ethereal
surges |
| 13. you, token of unearthly
life, | Breath of a transcendental
clime, |
| 14. you, dreams of sacred
poetry! | Dreams from the sacred
realm of rhyme. |

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Perhaps, for the world's
good | Perchance the world would
have saluted |
| 2. or, at least, for glory he
was born; | In him a <i>savior or a sage</i> ; |
| 3. his silenced lyre might
have aroused | His ly-ere, now forever
muted, |
| 4. a resonant, uninter-
rupted ringing | Might have resounded down
the <i>age</i> |
| 5. throughout the ages.
There awaited | In ceaseless <i>thunder</i> , and
have fated |
| 6. the poet, on the stair-
way of the world | <i>Its bearer</i> to be elevated |
| 7. perhaps, a lofty stair. | To <i>high rank</i> on the worldly
grade; |
| 8. His martyred shade has
carried | Or haply with his martyred
shade |
| 9. away with him, per-
haps, | Some holy <i>insight</i> will they
<i>bury</i> , |
| 10. a sacred mystery, and
for us | A <i>gem</i> , perchance, of <i>wisdom</i>
<i>choice</i> , |
| 11. dead is a life-creating
voice, | Now perished with his vital
voice. |
| 12. and to his shade beyond
the tomb's confines | The hymn of ages will not
carry |
| 13. will not rush up the
hymn of races, | <i>Deep into his sepulchral den</i> |
| 14. the blessing of the ages. | The benedictions of all men. |

I have italicized such verbal gobbets as are not found, or found in another form, in Pushkin's text. Omissions, here and throughout the version, are too numerous and too ingrained to be profitably catalogued. Passive readers will derive, no doubt, a casual illusion of sense from Arndt's actually nonsensical line 2 of xxxvi. They will hardly notice that the chancrous metaphor in lines 4–5 inflicted by a meretricious rhyme is not Pushkin's fault, nor wonder at

the naive temerity a paraphrast has of throwing in his own tropes when he should know that the figure of speech is the main, sacred quiddity and eyespot of a poet's genius, and is the last thing that should be tampered with. In the second stanza presented here our passive readers may skim over some other added metaphors, such as the "buried insight," the "gem of wisdom," and the "sepulchral den" (which suggests a dead lion rather than a dead poet). They may also swallow the "high rank" (which implies the sort of favor a meek poet like Zhukovski received from the Tsar, and not at all the "lofty stair" which Pushkin invokes); but perhaps the "thunder-bearer" of lines 5–6 shall briefly cause them to stumble.

These, I repeat, are types of the least offensive among Mr. Arndt's stanzas. A closer examination of the actual technique of his various mistranslations brings out the following points:

1. Natural objects changing their species or genus: "flea" turns into "roach," "aspen" into "ash," "birch" and "lime" into "beech," "pine" (many times) into "fir," and "racemose bird cherry" (*cheryomuba*) into "alder" (the harmful drudges who compile Russian-English dictionaries have at least, under *cheryomuba*, "black alder," *i.e.* "alder buckthorn," which is wrong, but not as wrong as Arndt's tree).

2. Transformation of names: "Prince N," Tatiana's husband, turns into "Prince M"; Griboedov's hero "Chatski" into "Chaatsky" (possibly through hybridization with Pushkin's friend Chaadaev); Tatiana's aunt "Pelageya Nikolavna" into "Pelya," an insufferable diminutive; another aunt, "Princess Aline," into the ridiculous "Princess Nancy"; Onegin's housekeeper, "Anisia," into "Mistress Anna," and "Vanya," the husband of Tatiana's nurse, into "Larry."

3. Anachronisms: Triquet's "spectacles" are said to be "gold pince-nez"; the "jams in jars" taken by Mrs. Larin to Moscow become "cans of jelly," and a traveler is introduced as "fresh from the station."

4. Comic scansion: “. . . where ou-er hero lately dwelled”; “. . . and ou-er luckless damzel tasted” (many more “ou-er”s throughout). The same with endings in “ire”; “fi-ere,” “squi-ere,” “desi-ere,” and so on. “Business” is scanned in a Germanic trisyllabic way (“no service, business or wife”), and, in another line, “egoism” is generously granted four syllables as if it were “egoisum.”

5. Burlesque rhymes: Feeler–Lyudmila, capital–ball, binoculars–stars, char–Africa, family–me, thrillers–pillows, invaders–days does; and rhymes based on dialect pronunciation: meadow–shadow, message–passage, tenor–manor, possession–fashion, bury–carry, and so on.

6. Crippled clichés and mongrel idioms: “my flesh is parched with thirst,” “the mother streaming with tears,” “the tears from Tania’s lashes gush,” “what ardor at her breast is found.”

7. Vulgarisms and stale slang: “the bells in décolleté creations,” “moms,” “twosomes,” “highbrow,” “his women,” “I sang of feet I knew before, dear lady-feet,” “dear heart, dear all” (Lenski in his last elegy to Olga), “Simon-pure,” “beau geste,” “hard to meet” (for “unsociable”), “my uncle, decorous old prune” (for “my uncle has most honest principles”), the nurse telling Tatiana “Aye, don’t holler,” Olga “blended of peach and cream,” Tatiana writing to Onegin “my knees were folding” and “you justly dealt with my advances” (Tatiana, Pushkin’s Tatiana!). Here too belongs a special little curiosity. The minds of versionists seldom meet but a singular convergence of that sort occurs in Eight: xxxviii. Pushkin shows Onegin moodily sitting by the fire and dropping into it “now a slipper, now his magazine.” Elton, in 1937, vulgarly translated this as “. . . the News drops in the fire or else his shoes” and Mr. Arndt has the almost identical “. . . the News slipped in the fi-ere or his shoes.”

8. Howlers and other glaring mistakes. The true howler is a joint product of ignorance and self-assurance. Here are a few of the many examples provided by Mr. Arndt. In

Six: v Pushkin describes Zaretski (formerly a rake, now a placid landowner in the backwoods of northwest Russia). Zaretski several years earlier, during the Napoleonic wars, was taken prisoner by the French and had a pleasant time in Paris—so pleasant in fact that now, in 1820–21, he would not mind being captured again (if there were another war) “so as to drink on credit at Véry’s [a café-restaurant in Paris, originally on the Terrasse des Feuillants in the Jardin des Tuileries] two or three bottles every morning.” Mr. Arndt completely misses the point, assumes that Véry is a Parisian restaurateur established in Russia (say in Pskov), not too far from Zaretski’s country seat, and boldly renders Pushkin’s lines as “. . . braving bondage (what bondage in 1821?), enraptured (with what?), he still gallops on his morning sprees to charge three bottles at Véry’s.” Another howler occurs in his version of Two: xxxv where Pushkin has “the people yawning” on Trinity Day in church, but where Arndt has “. . . Trinity when the peasants tell their beads” (which they do not commonly do in Russia) “and nod at morning service” (which is not easy in the Greek-Orthodox standing position). In Three: iii the meager fare Mrs. Larin offers to her guests (“jams in little dishes are brought; upon a small table, oil-cloth’d [lexically, “waxed”] a jug of lingonberry water is set”) becomes a Gargarnantuan feast with utensils for giants: “. . . bowls of preserves, then the habitual bilberry water lumbers on (?) in a great wax-sealed [mix-up with the epithet used in the text for the small table] demi-john” [two or three gallons?]. In Three: ix Pushkin alludes to St. Preux (“the lover of Julie Wolmar”) but Arndt, who apparently has not read Rousseau’s novel, confuses husband with lover: “Julie’s adoring swain, Wolmar.” In Three: xxviii Pushkin’s two learned ladies, one in a yellow shawl, as pedantic as a seminarian, and the other, a bonneted one, as grave as an academician (meaning member of the Academy of Sciences) are replaced in Arndt’s version by a Buddhist priest (“the saffron-muffled clerk in orders”) and an English don (“a mortar-boarded sage”), which, as

boners go, is a kind of multiple fracture. Pushkin's hills which in the beginning of Chapter Five are "softly over-spread with Winter's brilliant carpeting" become "mountain summits (in lowland Russia!) softly stretching 'neath Winter's scintillating shawl" (which produces an unexpected American-bosom image); the "sumptuous contact of yielding rugs" (One: xxxi) becomes the rather Freudian "voluptuous embrace of swelling carpets," and the "surgings" of a poet's "heart" (Four: xxxi) are gynandromorphosed into the "deep stirrings of [his] womb." There is no space to list all the glaring mistakes of this sort, and I shall mention only two more. In Six: xix Pushkin has listless Lenski, on the eve of his duel, "sit down at the clavichord and play but chords on it," a melancholy image which Arndt horribly transforms into: "the clavichord he would be pounding, with random chord set it resounding." And finally here is the bloomer in Arndt's version of the end of Three: xl where Pushkin speaks of a hare trembling as it suddenly sees from afar "a shotman in the bushes crouch" but where Arndt changes the weapon and has the hare listen "as from afar with sudden rush an arrow falls into the brush." The source of this blunder will be explained in the next section.

9. Inadequate knowledge of Russian. This is a professional ailment among non-Russian translators from Russian into English. Anything a little too far removed from the *kak-vy-pozhivaete-ya-pozhivayu-khorosho* group becomes a pit-fall, into which, rather than around which, dictionaries guide the groper; and when they are not consulted, then other disasters happen. In the abovementioned Three: xl passage, Mr. Arndt has evidently confused the word *strelká*, accusative of *strelók* (shooter, sportsman) with *strélka* (diminutive of *strela*, arrow). *Sed'moy chas* is not "past seven" (p. 149) but only past six. *Podzhavshi ruki* does not mean "arms akimbo" (p. 62) but "with snugly folded arms." *Vishen'e* is simply "cherries" (with which the girls pelt the cavedropper in their song in Chapter Three) and not

“cherry twigs” and “branches” with which Arndt makes them beat away the intruder. *Pustynnyy sneg* is “desolate snow,” not “desert snow” (p. 122). *V pubu* is “covered with fluff” and not “a little dim” (p. 127). *Obnovit’* (Two: xxxiii) is not to “renovate” or “mend” but to “inaugurate.” *Vino* in Two: xi is “liquor,” not “wine.” *Svod* in Four: xxi is not “freight,” but “code.” *Hory* (Seven: li) means the upper gallery of a public ballroom, and not “the involved rotations of rounds”—whatever that is.

10. Wobbly English. The phrase “next door” is used to mean “next room” (pp. 122 and 133). A skeleton impossibly “pouts” on p. 122. Lenski in the duel “closing his left eye starts to level” but Arndt (p. 132) makes him take aim with “his left eye blinking” like the corresponding tail light of a turning truck; soon after which (p. 157) “Dead lies our *dim* young *bard and lover* by friendly *hand and weapon* felled.” And the amazon of Six: xli whom Pushkin pictures as halting her steed before Lenski’s grave is hilariously made to “rein in her *charging* horse.”

11. Padding. Plug words and rhymes are bound to occur in rhymed versions, but I have seldom seen them used with such consistency and in such profusion as here. A typical example of routine padding (for the sake of a bad rhyme) is the puffing up of the literal “she says: farewell pacific dales, and you, familiar hill tops” (Seven: xxviii) to become, in Arndt’s version; “(she) whispers: Calm valleys where I sauntered, farewell; lone summits that I haunted.” When in the same chapter Tatiana is described by Pushkin as avidly reading Onegin’s books whereupon “a different world is revealed to her,” this becomes with Arndt: “an eager passage (!) door on door (!) to worlds she never knew before.” Here simple padding shades into the next category of mistranslation.

12. *Otsebyátina*. This convenient cant word consists of the words *ot*, meaning “from,” and *sebya*, meaning “one-self,” with a pejorative suffix, *yatina*, tagged on (its *ya* takes improper advantage of the genitive ending of the pronoun,

coinciding with it and producing a strongly stressed *bya* sound which to a Russian's ear connotes juvenile disgust). Lexically translated, it can be rendered as "come-from-oneselfer" or "from-oneselfity." It is employed to describe the personal contributions of self-sufficient or desperate translators (or actors who have forgotten their speeches). Here are some grotesque examples of *otsebyatina* in Arndt. Pushkin is describing (Eight: xxiv) the guests at Princess N's soirée: "Here were, in mobcaps and roses elderly ladies, wicked looking; here were several maidens—unsmiling faces." This is all there is about those ladies and maidens, but Arndt *otsebyatinates* thus: " . . . redecorated ladies with caps from France and scowls from Hades; among them here and there a girl without a smile from curl to curl (a fiendish ungrin!)." My other example refers to One: xxxiii where Pushkin has a famous description of "the waves, running in turbulent succession, with love to lie down at her feet"; this becomes "the waves . . . with uproar each the other goading, to curl in love about her feet." One hardly knows what infects one's fancy more painfully here—those waves prodding each other with tridents or that little drain-hole vortex in which their "uproar" ends.

Mr. Arndt's notes to his translation are lean and derivative but even so he manages to make several mistakes. The statement (p. xi) that the third edition of *Eugene Onegin* "appeared on the day of Pushkin's death" is wrong: it appeared not later than January 19, 1837, Old Style, that is at least ten days before the poet's death. He began writing *Eugene Onegin* not "on May 28, 1822," as Arndt (led astray by another bungling commentator and adding his own mistake) notes, but on May 9, 1823. The statuette of Napoleon with folded arms in Chapter Seven is not a "bust" (as stated in a note on p. 191): normal busts do not have arms to fold. The remark on p. 223 that " . . . Prolasov has been proposed" to fill in a gap in the printed text (first line of Eight: xxvi) is nonsense, since "Prolasov"

never existed, being merely a comedy name (meaning “climber” or “vile sycophant”) preserved in Pushkin’s fair copy and misapplied by some editors to Andrey Saburov, director of the Imperial theaters.

Mr. Arndt’s most bizarre observation, however, comes on page vi, towards the end of his preface: “The present new translation . . . is not aimed primarily at the academic and literary expert, but at a public of English-speaking students and others interested in a central work of world literature in a compact and readable form.”—which is tantamount to proclaiming: “I know this is an inferior product but it is gaily colored and nicely packed, and is, anyway, just for students and such people.”

It is only fair to add that this “brilliant” (as said on the upperside of the volume) and “splendid” (as said on its underside) new translation has won one half of the third annual Bollingen prize for the best translation of poetry in English (as the librarian James T. Babb of the Yale University Library announced on November 19, 1963, in New Haven, Conn.). The committee making the awards included Professors Peyre, René Wellek, and John Hollander, of Yale; and Professor Reuben A. Brouwer, of Harvard University. (I rely on Steve Kezerian, Director of the Yale University News Bureau, for the spelling of these names). Representing the permanent committee of administration at Yale was Donald G. Wing, Associate Yale Librarian. One cannot help wondering if any of the professors really read this readable work—or the infinitely remote great poem of their laureate’s victim.

Montreux, December 23, 1963

Published in *The New York Review of Books* on April 30, 1964. A “Second Printing, revised” of Arndt’s “translation” appeared later (1965?) but despite the note saying (p. v) that “several emendations were suggested by Vladimir Nabokov’s criticisms at various times” this “revised” version still remains as abominable as before.

4

REPLY TO MY CRITICS

In regard to my novels my position is different. I cannot imagine myself writing a letter-to-the-editor in reply to an unfavorable review, let alone devoting almost a whole day to composing a magazine article of explanation, retaliation, and protest. I have waited at least thirty years to take notice—casual and amused notice—of some scurvy abuse I met with in my “V. Sirin” disguise, but that pertains to bibliography. My inventions, my circles, my special islands are infinitely safe from exasperated readers. Nor have I ever yielded to the wild desire to thank a benevolent critic—or at least to express somehow my tender awareness of this or that friendly writer’s sympathy and understanding, which in some extraordinary way seem always to coincide with talent and originality, an interesting, though not quite inexplicable phenomenon.

If, however, adverse criticism happens to be directed not at those acts of fancy, but at such a matter-of-fact work of reference as my annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin* (hereafter referred to as EO), other considerations take over. Unlike my novels, EO possesses an ethical side, moral and human elements. It reflects the compiler’s honesty or dishonesty, skill or sloppiness. If told I am a bad poet, I smile; but if told I am a poor scholar, I reach for my heaviest dictionary.

I do not think I have received all the reviews that appeared after EO was published; I fail to locate a few that I was sure I had in my chaotic study; but judging by the numerous ones that did reach me, one might conclude that literal translation represents an approach entirely devised by me; that it had never been heard of before; and that there was something offensive and even sinister about such a method and undertaking. Promoters and producers of what Anthony Burgess calls “arty translations”—carefully rhymed, pleasantly modulated versions containing, say, eighteen percent of sense plus thirty-two of nonsense and fifty of neutral padding—are I think more prudent than they realize. While ostensibly tempted by impossible dreams, they are subliminally impelled by a kind of self-preservation. The “arty translation” protects them by concealing and camouflaging ignorance or incomplete information or the fuzzy edge of limited knowledge. Stark literalism, on the other hand, would expose their fragile frame to unknown and incalculable perils.

It is quite natural, then, that the solidly unionized professional paraphrast experiences a surge of dull hatred and fear, and in some cases real panic, when confronted with the possibility that a shift in fashion, or the influence of an adventurous publishing house, may suddenly remove from his head the cryptic rosebush he carries or the maculated shield erected between him and the specter of inexorable knowledge. As a result the canned music of rhymed versions is enthusiastically advertised, and accepted, and the sacrifice of textual precision applauded as something rather heroic, whereas only suspicion and bloodhounds await the gaunt, graceless literalist groping around in despair for the obscure word that would satisfy impassioned fidelity and accumulating in the process a wealth of information which only makes the advocates of pretty camouflage tremble or sneer.

These observations, although suggested by specific facts, should not be construed in a strictly *pro domo sua* sense. My

LOC falls short of the ideal crib. It is still not close enough and not ugly enough. In future editions I plan to defowlerize it still more drastically. I think I shall turn it entirely into utilitarian prose, with a still bumpier brand of English, rebarbative barricades of square brackets and tattered banners of reprobate words, in order to eliminate the last vestiges of bourgeois poesy and concession to rhythm. This is something to look forward to. For the moment, all I wish is merely to put on record my utter disgust with the general attitude, amoral and Philistine, towards literalism.

It is indeed wonderful how indifferent most critics are to the amount of unwillful deceit going on in the translation trade. I recall once opening a copy of Bely's *Petersburg* in English, and lighting upon a monumental howler in a famous passage about a blue coupé which had been hopelessly discolored by the translator's understanding *kubovyy* (which means "blue") as "cubic"! This has remained a model and a symbol. But who cares and why bother? Mr. Rosen in *The Saturday Review* (November 28, 1964) ends his remarks on rhymed versions of *Eugene Onegin* with the expression of a rapturous hope: "It only remains for a talented poet like Robert Lowell to take advantage [of these versions] to produce a poem in English that really sings and soars." But this is an infernal vision to me who can distinguish in the most elaborate imitation the simple schoolboy howler from the extraneous imagery within which it is so pitifully imbedded. Again—what does it matter? "It is part of the act," as Mr. Edmund Wilson would say. The incredible errors in the translations from the Russian which are being published nowadays with frenetic frequency are dismissed as trivial blemishes that only a pedant would note.

Even Professor Muchnic, who in a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books* delicately takes Mr. Guy Daniels apart as if he were an unfamiliar and possibly defective type of coffee machine, neglects to point out that in both versions of Lermontov's poem which she quotes—Daniels'

effort and Baring's very minor (*pace* Mirski) poem—the same grotesque imp blows a strident trumpet. For we have here an admirable example of one of those idiomatic freaks that for reasons of mental balance foreigners should not even try to rationalize. Lermontov's Russian goes: *Sosedka est' u nih odna . . . Kak vspomnish', kak davno rasstalis'!* And the literal sense is: "They have a certain neighbor [fem.] . . . Oh, to think how long ago we parted!" The form *vspomnish'* looks like the second person singular of "remember," but in this intonational arrangement it should be the first person in literal translation since it is addressed by the speaker to himself. Now, both versionists being ignorant of idiomatic Russian did not hesitate to use the second person (though actually the result gives a painfully didactic twist to the sentence, which should have made the translator think twice). Baring's version (which Professor Muchnic, I am sorry to say, calls "a wonderfully precise reproduction of the sense, the idiom") runs: "We had a neighbor . . . and *you remember* I and she . . ." While the more humble Daniels translates: "There was a girl as *you'll recall* . . ." I have italicized the shared boner. The point is not that one version is better than the other (frankly there is not much to choose between the two); the point is that unwittingly *both* use the same wrong person as if all paraphrasts were interconnected omphalically by an ectoplasmic band.

Despite the violent attitude towards literalism, I still find a little surprising the intensity of human passions that my rather dry, rather dull work provokes. Hack reviewers rush to the defense of the orthodox Soviet publicists whom I "chastise" and of whom they have never heard before. A more or less displaced Russian in New York maintains that my commentary is nothing but a collection of obscure trifles and that besides he remembers having heard it all many years ago in Gorki from his high-school teacher, A. A. Artamonov.

The word "mollitude," which I use a few times, has been

now so often denounced that it threatens to become almost a household word, like “nymphet.” One of my most furious and inarticulate attackers seems to be an intimate friend of Belinski (born 1811), as well as of all the paraphrasts I “persecute.” The fury is, I suppose, pardonable and noble, but there would be no sense in my reacting to it. I shall also ignore some of the slapstick—such as a little item in *The New Republic* (April 3, 1965) which begins “Inspector Nabokov has revisited the scene of the crime in *L’affaire Oneguine*” and is prompted by a sordid little grudge of which the editor, presumably, had no knowledge. A reviewer writing in the *Novyy Zhurnal* (No. 77), Mr. Moris Fridberg—whom I am afraid I shall be accused of having invented—employs a particularly hilarious brand of bad Russian (*kak izvestno dlya lyubogo studenta*, as known “for” every student) to introduce the interesting idea that textual fidelity is unnecessary because “in itself the subject-matter of [Pushkin’s] work is not very important.” He goes on to complain that I do not say a word about such Pushkinists as Modzalevski, Tomashevski, Bondi, Shchyogolev, and Gofman—a statement that proves he has not only not read my commentary, but has not even consulted the Index; and on top of that he confuses me with Professor Arndt whose preliminary remarks about his “writing not for experts but students” Mr. Fridberg ascribes to me. A still more luckless gentleman (in the *Los Angeles Times*) is so incensed by the pride and prejudice of my commentary that he virtually chokes on his wrath and after enticingly entitling his article “Nabokov Fails as a Translator” has to break it off abruptly without having made one single reference to the translation itself. Among the more serious articles there is a long one in *The New York Times Book Review*, June 28, 1964, by Mr. Ernest Simmons, who obligingly corrects what he takes to be a misprint in One: xxv: 5; “Chadaev,” he says, should be “Chaadaev”; but from my note to that passage he should have seen that “Chadaev” is one of the three forms of that

name, and also happens to be Pushkin's own spelling in that particular line, which otherwise would not have scanned.

For obvious reasons I cannot discuss all the sympathetic reviews. I shall only refer to some of them in order to acknowledge certain helpful suggestions and corrections. I am grateful to John Bayley (*The Observer*, November 29, 1964) for drawing my attention to what he calls—much too kindly, alas—“the only slip” in my commentary: “*Auf allen Gipfeln*” (in the reference to Goethe's poem) should be corrected to “*Ueber allen Gipfeln*.” (I can add at least one other: My note to Two: xxxv: 8 contains a silly blunder and should be violently deleted.) Anthony Burgess in *Encounter* has suddenly and conclusively abolished my sentimental fondness for FitzGerald by showing how he falsified the “witty metaphysical tent-maker's” actual metaphors in “*Awake! for morning in the bowl of Night . . .*”. John Wain, in *The Listener* (April 29, 1965), by a sheer feat of style has made me at once sorry for one of my “victims” and weak with laughter: “This [the discussion of prosody], by the way, is the section in which Arthur Hugh Clough gets described as a poetaster; the effect is like that of seeing an innocent bystander suddenly buried by a fall of snow from a roof” J. Thomas Shaw, in *The Russian Review* (April 1965), observes that I should have promoted Pushkin after his graduation to the tenth civil rank (“collegiate secretary”) instead of leaving him stranded on the fourteenth rung of the ladder; but I cannot find in my copy the misprinted Derzhavin date which he also cites; and I strongly object to his listing James Joyce, whom I revere, among those writers whom I condemn “in contemptuous asides” (apparently Mr. Shaw has dreadfully misunderstood what I say about Joyce's characters falling asleep by applying it to Joyce's readers). Finally, the anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* (January 28, 1965) is perfectly right when he says that in my notes I do not discuss Pushkin's art in sufficient detail; he makes a number of attractive sugges-

tions which, together with those of two other reviewers and several correspondents, would make a fifth volume, or at least a very handsome *Festschrift*. The same reviewer is much too lenient when he remarks that "a careful scrutiny of every line has failed to reveal a single careless error in translation." There are at least two: in Four: XLIII: 2, the word "but" should be deleted, and in Five: XI: 3, "lawn" should be "plain."

The longest, most ambitious, most captious, and, alas, most reckless, article is Mr. Edmund Wilson's in *The New York Review of Books* (July 15, 1965)*, and this I now select for a special examination.

A number of earnest simpletons consider Mr. Wilson to be an authority in my field ("he misses few of Nabokov's lapses," as one hasty well-wisher puts it in a letter to *The New York Review* on August 26), and no doubt such delusions should not be tolerated; still, I am not sure that the necessity to defend my work from blunt jabs and incompetent blame would have been a sufficient incentive for me to discuss that article, had I not been moved to do so by the unusual, unbelievable, and highly entertaining opportunity that I am unexpectedly given by Mr. Wilson himself of refuting practically every item of criticism in his enormous piece. The mistakes and misstatements in it form an uninterrupted series so complete as to seem artistic in reverse, making one wonder if, perhaps, it had not been woven that way on purpose to be turned into something pertinent and coherent when reflected in a looking glass. I am unaware of any other such instance in the history of literature. It is a polemicist's dream come true, and one must be a poor sportsman to disdain what it offers.

As Mr. Wilson points out with such disarming good humor at the beginning of his piece, he and I are old

* This is the text readers should consult. It is reprinted in an abridged, emended, and incoherent form in Edmund Wilson's *A Window on Russia*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1972.

friends. I fully reciprocate "the warm affection sometimes chilled by exasperation" that he says he feels for me. When I first came to America a quarter of a century ago, he wrote to me, and called on me, and was most kind to me in various matters, not necessarily pertaining to his profession. I have always been grateful to him for the tact he showed in not reviewing any of my novels while constantly saying flattering things about me in the so-called literary circles where I seldom revolve. We have had many exhilarating talks, have exchanged many frank letters. A patient confidant of his long and hopeless infatuation with the Russian language and literature, I have invariably done my best to explain to him his monstrous mistakes of pronunciation, grammar, and interpretation. As late as 1957, at one of our last meetings, in Ithaca, upstate New York, where I lived at the time, we both realized with amused dismay that, despite my frequent comments on Russian prosody, he still could not scan Russian verse. Upon being challenged to read *Evgeniy Onegin* aloud, he started to perform with great gusto, garbling every second word, and turning Pushkin's iambic line into a kind of spastic anapest with a lot of jaw-twisting haws and rather endearing little barks that utterly jumbled the rhythm and soon had us both in stitches.

In the present case, I greatly regret that Mr. Wilson did not consult me about his perplexities, as he used to in the past. Here are some of the ghastly blunders that might have been so easily avoided.

"Why," asks Mr. Wilson, "should Nabokov call the word *netu* an old-fashioned and dialect form of *net*. It is in constant colloquial use and what I find one usually gets for an answer when one asks for some book in the Soviet bookstore in New York." Mr. Wilson has mistaken the common colloquial *netu* which means "there is not," "we do not have it," etc., for the obsolete *netu* which he has never heard and which as I explain in my note to Three: III: 12, is

a form of *net* in the sense of “not so” (the opposite of “yes”).

“The character called *yo*,” Mr. Wilson continues, “is pronounced . . . more like ‘yaw’ than like the ‘yo’ in ‘yonder.’” Mr. Wilson should not try to teach me how to pronounce this, or any other, Russian vowel. My “yo” is the standard rendering of the sound. The “yaw” sound he suggests is grotesque and quite wrong. I can hear Mr. Wilson—whose accent in Russian I know so well—asking that bookseller of his for “*Myawrtvye Dushi*” (“Dead Souls”). No wonder he did not get it.

“*Vse*,” according to Mr. Wilson (explaining two varieties of the Russian for “all”), “is applied to people, and *vsyo* to things.” This is a meaningless pronouncement. *Vse* is merely the plural of *ves*’ (masculine), *vsya* (feminine), and *vsyo* (neuter).

Mr. Wilson is puzzled by my assertion that the adjective *zloy* is the only one-syllable adjective in Russian. “How about the one-syllable predicative adjectives?” he asks. The answer is simple: I am not talking of predicative adjectives. Why drag them in? Such forms as *mudr* (“is wise”), *glup* (“is stupid”), *ploh* (“is very sick indeed”) are not adjectives at all, but adverbish mongrels which may differ in sense from the related adjectives.

In discussing the word *pochuya* Mr. Wilson confuses it with *chuya* (“sensing”) (see my letter about this word in the *New Statesman*, April 23, 1965) and says that had Pushkin used *pochuyav*, only then should I have been entitled to put “having sensed.” “Where,” queries Mr. Wilson, “is our scrupulous literalness?” Right here. My friend is unaware that despite the different endings, *pochuyav* and *pochuya* happen to be interchangeable, both being “past gerunds,” and both meaning exactly the same thing.

All this is rather extraordinary. Every time Mr. Wilson starts examining a Russian phrase he makes some ludicrous slip. His didactic purpose is defeated by such errors, as it is also by the strange tone of his article. Its mixture of

pompous aplomb and peevish ignorance is hardly conducive to a sensible discussion of Pushkin's language and mine—or indeed any language, for, as we shall presently see, Mr. Wilson's use of English is also singularly imprecise and misleading.

First of all it is simply not true to say, as he does, that in my review of Professor Arndt's translation (*The New York Review of Books*, August 30, 1964) "Nabokov dwelt especially on what he regarded as Professor Arndt's Germanisms and other infelicities of phrasing, without apparently being aware of how vulnerable he himself was." I dwelled especially on Arndt's mistranslations. What Mr. Wilson regards as my infelicities may be more repellent to him for psychological reasons than "anything in Arndt," but they belong to another class of error than Arndt's or any other paraphrast's casual blunders, and what is more Mr. Wilson knows it. I dare him to deny that he deliberately confuses the issue by applying the term "niggling attack" to an indignant examination of the insults dealt out to Pushkin's masterpiece in yet another arty translation. Mr. Wilson affirms that "the only characteristic Nabokov trait" in my translation (aside from an innate "sodomasochistic" urge "to torture both the reader and himself," as Mr. Wilson puts it in a clumsy attempt to stick a particularly thick and rusty pin into my effigy) is my "addiction to rare and unfamiliar words." It does not occur to him that I may have rare and unfamiliar things to convey; that is his loss. He goes on, however, to say that in view of my declared intention to provide students with a trot such words are "entirely inappropriate" here, since it would be more to the point for the student to look up the Russian word than the English one. I shall stop only one moment to consider Mr. Wilson's pathetic assumption that a student can read Pushkin, or any other Russian poet, by "looking up" every word (after all, the result of this simple method is far too apparent in Mr. Wilson's own mistranslations and misconceptions), or that a

reliable and complete *Russko-angliyskiy slovar*' not only exists (it does not) but is more easily available to the student than, say, the second unabridged edition (1960) of Webster's, which I really must urge Mr. Wilson to acquire. Even if that miraculous *slovar*' did exist, there would still be the difficulty of choosing, without my help, the right shade between two near synonyms and avoiding, without my guidance, the trap-falls of idiomatic phrases no longer in use.

Edmund Wilson sees himself (not quite candidly, I am afraid, and certainly quite erroneously) as a commonsensical, artless, average reader with a natural vocabulary of, say, six hundred basic words. No doubt such an imaginary reader may be sometimes puzzled and upset by the tricky terms I find it necessary to use here and there—very much here and there. But how many such innocents will tackle EO anyway? And what does Mr. Wilson mean by implying I should not use words that in the process of lexicographic evolution begin to occur only at the level of a "fairly comprehensive dictionary"? When does a dictionary cease being an abridged one and start growing "fairly" and then "extremely" comprehensive? Is the sequence: vest-pocket, coat-pocket, greatcoat-pocket, my three book shelves, Mr. Wilson's rich library? And should the translator simply omit any reference to an idea or an object if the only right word—a word he happens to know as a teacher or a naturalist, or an inventor of words—is discoverable in the revised edition of a standard dictionary but not in its earlier edition or *vice versa*? Disturbing possibilities! Nightmarish doubts! And how does the harassed translator know that somewhere on the library ladder he has just stopped short of Wilson's Fairly Comprehensive and may safely use "polyhedral" but not "lingonberry"? (Incidentally, the percentage of what Mr. Wilson calls "dictionary words" in my translation is really so absurdly small that I have difficulty in finding examples.)

Mr. Wilson can hardly be unaware that once a writer chooses to youthen or resurrect a word, it lives again, sobs again, stumbles all over the cemetery in doublet and trunk hose, and will keep annoying stodgy gravediggers as long as that writer's book endures. In several instances, English archaisms have been used in my EO not merely to match Russian antiquated words but to revive a nuance of meaning present in the ordinary Russian term but lost in the English one. Such terms are not meant to be idiomatic. The phrases I decide upon aspire towards literality, not readability. They are steps in the ice, pitons in the sheer rock of fidelity. Some are mere signal words whose only purpose is to suggest or indicate that a certain pet term of Pushkin's has recurred at that point. Others have been chosen for their Gallic touch implicit in this or that Russian attempt to imitate a French turn of phrase. All have pedigrees of agony and rejection and reinstatement, and should be treated as convalescents and ancient orphans, and not hooted at as impostors by a critic who says he admires some of my books. I do not care if a word is "archaic" or "dialect" or "slang"; I am an eclectic democrat in this matter, and whatever suits me, goes. My method may be wrong but it is a method, and a genuine critic's job should have been to examine the method itself instead of crossly fishing out of my pond some of the oddities with which I had deliberately stocked it.

Let me now turn to what Mr. Wilson calls my "infelicities" and "aberrations" and explain to him why I use the words he does not like or does not know.

In referring to Onegin's not being attracted by the picture of family life, Pushkin in Four: XIII: 5 uses the phrase *semeystvennoy kartinoy*. The modern term is *semeynoy kartinoy* and had Pushkin chosen it, I might have put "family picture." But I had to indicate the presence of Pushkin's rarer word and used therefore the rarer "familistic" as a signal word.

In order to indicate the archaic note in *vospomnya* (used by Pushkin in One: XLVII: 6–7 instead of *vspomnya*, or *vspomniv*, or *vspominaya*), as well as to suggest the deep sonorous diction of both lines (*vospomnya prezbnih let romany; vospomnya*, etc.), I had to find something more reverberating and evocative than “recalling intrigues of past years,” etc., and whether Mr. Wilson (or Mr. N. for that matter) likes it or not, nothing more suitable than “rememorating” for *vospomnya* can be turned up.*

Mr. Wilson also dislikes “curvate,” a perfectly plain and technically appropriate word which I have used to render *krivye* because I felt that “curved” or “crooked” did not quite do justice to Onegin’s regularly bent manicure scissors.

Similarly, not a passing whim but the considerations of prolonged thought led me to render Four: IX: 5, *privychkoy zhizni izbalovan*, as “spoiled by a habitude of life.” I needed the Gallic touch and found it preferable in allusive indefinitude—Pushkin’s line is elegantly ambiguous—to “habit of life” or “life’s habit.” “Habitude” is the right and good word here. It is not labeled “dialect” or “obsolete” in Webster’s great dictionary.

Another perfectly acceptable word is “rummer,” which I befriended because of its kinship with *ryumka*, and because I wished to find for the *ryumki* of Five: XXIX: 4 a more generalized wineglass than the champagne flutes of XXXII: 8–9, which are also *ryumki*. If Mr. Wilson consults my notes, he will see that on second thought I demoted the non-obsolete but rather oversized cups of XXIX to jiggers of vodka tossed down before the first course.

I cannot understand why Mr. Wilson is puzzled by “dit” (Five: VIII: 13) which I chose instead of “ditty” to parallel “kit” instead of “kitty” in the next line, and which will now,

* For reasons having nothing to do with the subject of this essay I subsequently changed the translation, exact in tone but not in syntax, of those two lines (see the epigraph to my *Mary*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1970).

I hope, enter or re-enter the language. Possibly, the masculine rhyme I needed here may have led me a little astray from the servile path of literalism (Pushkin has simply *pesnya*—"song"). But it is not incomprehensible; after all, anybody who knows what, say, "titty" means ("in nail-making the part that ejects the half-finished nail") can readily understand what "tit" means ("the part that ejects the finished nail").

Next on Mr. Wilson's list of inappropriate words is "gloom." It is a poetic word, and Keats has used it. It renders perfectly the *mgla* of the gathering evening shadows in Four: XLVII: 8, as well as the soft darkness of trees in Three: XVI: 11. It is better than "murk," a dialect word that Mr. Wilson uses for *mgla*, with my sanction, in another passage—the description of a wintry dawn.

In the same passage which both I and Mr. Wilson have translated, my "shippon" is as familiar to anyone who knows the English countryside as Mr. Wilson's "byre" should be to a New England farmer. Both "shippon" and "byre" are unknown to pocket-dictionary readers; both are listed in the three-centimeter-thick Penguin (1965). But I prefer "shippon" for *blev* because I see its shape as clearly as that of the Russian cow-house it resembles, but see only a Vermont barn when I try to visualize "byre".

Then there is "scrab": "he scrabs the poor thing up," *bednyazhku tsaptsarap* (One: XIV: 8). This *tsaptsarap*—a "verbal interjection" presupposing (as Pushkin notes when employing it in another poem) the existence of the artificial verb *tsaptsarapat'*, jocular and onomatopoeic—combines *tsapat'* ("to snatch") with *tsarapat'* ("to scratch"). I rendered Pushkin's uncommon word by the uncommon "scrab up," which combines "grab" and "scratch," and am proud of it. It is in fact a wonderful find.

I shall not analyze the phrase "in his lunes" that Mr. Wilson for good measure has included among my "aberrations." It occurs not in my translation, which he is dis-

cussing, but in the flow of my ordinary comfortable descriptive prose which we can discuss another time.

We now come to one of the chief offenders: "mollitude." For Pushkin's Gallic *nega* I needed an English counterpart of *mollesse* as commonly used in such phrases as *il perdit ses jeunes années dans la mollesse et la volupté* or *son coeur nage dans la mollesse*. It is incorrect to say, as Mr. Wilson does, that readers can never have encountered "mollitude." Readers of Browning have. In this connection Mr. Wilson wonders how I would have translated *chistyh neg* in one of Pushkin's last elegies—would I have said "pure mollitudes"? It so happens that I translated that little poem thirty years ago, and when Mr. Wilson locates my version (in the Introduction to one of my novels*) he will note that the genitive plural of *nega* is a jot different in sense from the singular.

In Mr. Wilson's collection of *bêtes noires* my favorite is "sapajou." He wonders why I render *dostoyno staryh obez'yan* as "worthy of old sapajous" and not as "worthy of old monkeys." True, *obez'yana* means any kind of monkey but it so happens that neither "monkey" nor "ape" is good enough in the context.

"Sapajou" (which technically is applied to two genera of neotropical monkeys) has in French a colloquial sense of "ruffian," "lecher," "ridiculous chap." Now, in lines 1–2 and 9–11 of Four: vii ("the less we love a woman, the easier 'tis to be liked by her . . . but that grand game is worthy of old sapajous of our forefathers' vaunted times") Pushkin echoes a moralistic passage in his own letter written in French from Kishinev to his young brother in Moscow in the autumn of 1822, that is seven months before beginning *Eugene Onegin* and two years before reaching Canto Four. The passage, well known to readers of Pushkin, goes: "*Moins on aime une femme et plus on est sur de l'avoir . . . mais cette jouissance est digne d'un vieux sapajou du dix-huitième siècle.*"

* *Despair*. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 302–303, 1966.

Not only could I not resist the temptation of retranslating the *obez'yan* of the canto into the Anglo-French “sapajous” of the letter, but I was also looking forward to somebody’s pouncing on that word and allowing me to retaliate with that wonderfully satisfying reference. Mr. Wilson obliged—and here it is.

“There are also actual errors of English,” continued Mr. Wilson, and gives three examples: “dwelled” which I prefer to “dwelt”; “about me,” which in Two: xxxix: 14 is used to render *obo mne* instead of the better “of me”; and the word “loaden,” which Mr. Wilson “had never heard before.” But “dwelled” is marked in my dictionary only “less usual”—not “incorrect”; “remind about” is not quite impossible (*e.g.*, “remind me about it tomorrow”); as to “loaden,” which Mr. Wilson suggests replacing by “loadened,” *his* English wobbles, not mine, since “loaden” is the correct past participle and participial adjective of “load.”

In the course of his strange defense of Arndt’s version—in which, according to Mr. Wilson, I had been assiduously tracking down Germanisms—he asserts that “it is not difficult to find Russianisms in Nabokov” and turns up *one*, or the shadow of one (“left us” should be “has left us” in a passage that I cannot trace). Surely there must be more than one such slip in a work fifteen hundred pages long devoted by a Russian to a Russian poem; however, the two other Russianisms Mr. Wilson lists are the figments of his own ignorance:

In translating *slushat' shum morskoy* (Eight: iv: 11) I chose the archaic and poetic transitive turn “to listen the sound of the sea” because the relevant passage has in Pushkin a stylized archaic tone. Mr. Wilson may not care for this turn—I do not much care for it either—but it is silly of him to assume that I lapsed into a naive Russianism not being really aware that, as he tells me, “in English you have to listen *to* something.” First, it is Mr. Wilson who is not aware of the fact that there exists an analogous construction

in Russian *prislushivat'sya k zvuku*, "to listen closely to the sound"—which, of course, makes nonsense of the exclusive Russianism imagined by him, and secondly, had he happened to leaf through a certain canto of *Don Juan*, written in the year Pushkin was beginning his poem, or a certain *Ode to Memory*, written when Pushkin's poem was being finished, my learned friend would have concluded that Byron ("Listening debates not very wise or witty") and Tennyson ("Listening the lordly music") must have had quite as much Russian blood as Pushkin and I.

In the mazurka of Canto Five one of the dancers "leads Tatiana with Olga" (*podvyol Tat'yanu s Ol'goy*) towards Onegin. This has little to do with the idiomatic *my s ney* (which is lexically "we with her," but may mean "she and I") that Mr. Wilson mentions. Actually, in order to cram both girls into the first three feet of Five: xliiv: 3, Pushkin allowed himself a minor solecism. The construction *podvyol Tat'yanu i Ol'gu* would have been better Russian (just as "Tatiana and Olga" would have been better English), but it would not have scanned. Now Mr. Wilson should note carefully that this unfortunate *Tat'yanu s Ol'goy* has an additional repercussion: it clashes unpleasantly with the next line where the associative form is compulsory: *Onegin s Ol'goyu poshyol*, "Onegin goes with Olga." Throughout my translation I have remained a thousand times more faithful to Pushkin's Russian than to Wilson's English and therefore in these passages I did not hesitate to reproduce both the solecism and the ensuing clash.

"The handling of French is peculiar," grimly observes Mr. Wilson, and adduces three instances:

"The name of Rousseau's heroine is," he affirms, "given on one page as Julie and on the next as Julia." This is an absurd cavil since she is named Julie all the thirteen times she is mentioned in the course of the four-page note referring to her (the note to Three: ix: 7), as well as numerous times elsewhere (see Index); but maybe Mr.

Wilson has confused her with Augustus' or Byron's girl (see Index again).

The second "peculiar" example refers to the word *monde* in the world-of-fashion sense copiously described in my note to One: v: 8 (*le monde, le beau monde, le grand monde*). According to Mr. Wilson it should always appear with its "*le*" in the translation of the poem. This is an inept practice, of course (advocated mainly by those who, like Mr. Wilson, are insecure and self-conscious in their use of *le* and *la*), and would have resulted in saying "*le noisy monde*" instead of "the noisy *monde*" (Eight: xxxiv: 12). English writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wrote "the *monde*," not "le monde." I am sure that if Mr. Wilson consults the OED, which I do not have here, he will find examples from Walpole, Byron, Thackeray, and others. What was good enough for them is good enough for Pushkin and me.

Finally, in this peculiar group of peculiar French there is the word *sauvage*, which according to Mr. Wilson should not have appeared in my rendering of Two: xxv: 5, *dika, pechal'na, molchaliva*, "*sauvage*, sad, silent"; but apart from the fact that it has no exact English equivalent, I chose this signal word to warn readers that Pushkin was using *dika* not simply in the sense of "wild" or "unsociable" but in a Gallic sense as a translation of "*sauvage*". Incidentally, it often occurs in English novels of the time along with *monde* and *ennui*.

"As for the classics," says Mr. Wilson, "Zoilus should be Zoïlus and Eol, Aeolus." But the diacritical sign is quite superfluous in the first case (see, for instance, Webster) and "Eol" is a poetical abbreviation constantly cropping up in English poetry. Moreover, Mr. Wilson can find the full form in my Index. I am unable to prevent my own Zoilus from imitating a bright and saucy schoolboy, but really he should not tell me how to spell the plural of "automaton" which has two endings, both correct. And what business does he have to rebuke me for preferring Theocritus to Virgil and to insinuate that I have read neither?

There is also the strange case of “stuss.” “What does N. mean,” queries Mr. Wilson, “when he speaks of Pushkin’s addiction to stuss? This is not an English word and if he means the Hebrew word for nonsense which has been absorbed into German, it ought to be italicized and capitalized. But even on this assumption it hardly makes sense.” This is Mr. Wilson’s nonsense, not mine. “Stuss” is the English name of a card game which I discuss at length in my notes on Pushkin’s addiction to gambling. Mr. Wilson should really consult *some* of my notes (and Webster’s dictionary).

Then there is Mr. Nabokov’s style. My style may be all Mr. Wilson says, clumsy, banal, etc. But in regard to the examples he gives it is not *unnecessarily* clumsy, banal, etc. If in translating *toska lyubvi Tat’yanu gonit* (Three: xvi: 1), “the ache of love chases Tatiana” (not “the ache of loss,” as Mr. Wilson nonsensically misquotes), I put “chases” instead of the “pursues” that Mr. Wilson has the temerity to propose, I do so not only because “pursues” is in Russian not *gonit* but *presleduet*, but also because, as Mr. Wilson has not noticed, it would be a misleading repetition of the “pursue” used in the preceding stanza (*tebya presleduyut mechty*, “day-dreams pursue you”), and my method is to repeat a term at close range only when Pushkin repeats it.

When the nurse says to Tatiana *nu delo, delo, ne gnevaysya, dusha moyá*, and I render it by “this now makes sense, do not be cross with me, my soul,” Mr. Wilson in a tone of voice remindful of some seventeenth-century French pedant discoursing on high and low style, declares that “make sense” and “my soul” do not go together, as if he knows which terms in the nurse’s Russian go together or do not!

As I have already said, many of the recurring words I use (ache, pal, mollitude, and so on) are what I call “signal words,” *i.e.*, terms meant, among other things, to indicate the recurrence of the corresponding Russian word. Style, indeed! It is correct information I wish to give and not samples of “correct style.” I translate *ochen’ milo postupil . . .*

nash priyatel', in the beginning of Four: xviii (which is also the beginning of the least artistic section in Four: xviii–xxii), by “very nicely did our pal act,” and this Mr. Wilson finds “vulgarly phrased”; but Mr. Wilson stomps in where I barely dare to tread because he is quite unaware that the corresponding Russian phrase is also trite and trivial. There simply exists no other way of rendering that genteel *ochen' milo* (Pushkin is imitating here a simpering reader), and if I chose here and elsewhere the signal word “pal” to render the colloquial turn of *priyatel'*, it is because there exists no other way of expressing it. “Pal” retains the unpleasant flippancy of *priyatel'* as used here, besides reproducing its first and last letters. *Priyatel' Vil'son* would be, for instance, a flippant and nasty phrase, out of place in a serious polemical text. Or does Mr. Wilson really think that the passage in question is better rendered by Professor Arndt? (“My reader, can you help bestowing praise on Eugene for the fine part he played with stricken Tanya?”)

Mr. Wilson's last example in the series pertaining to “bad style” has to do with the end of Seven: xxxii. When rendering the elegiac terms in which Tatiana takes leave of her country home, I had to take into account their resemblance to the diction of Pushkin's youthful elegy addressed to a beloved country place (“Farewell, ye faithful coppices,” etc.), and also to that of Lenski's last poem. It was a question of adjustment and alignment. This is why I have Tatiana say in a stilted and old-fashioned idiom, “Farewell, pacific sites, farewell, secluded [note the old-fashioned pronunciation of the correspondent *uedinennyy*] refuge! Shall I see you?” “Such passages,” says Mr. Wilson, “sound like the products of those computers which are supposed to translate Russian into English.” But since those computers are fed only the basic Russian Mr. Wilson has mastered, and are directed by anthropologists and progressive linguists, the results would be *his* comic versions, and not my clumsy but literal translation.

Probably the most rollicking part of Mr. Wilson's animadversions is the one in which he offers his own mistranslation as the perfection I should have tried to emulate.

My rendering of *gusey krikliwyh karavan tyanulsya k yugu* (Four: xli: 11 and beginning of 12) is "the caravan of clamorous geese was tending southward" but, as I note in my commentary, *krikliwyh* is lexically "screamy"* and the idiomatic *tyanulsya* conveys a very special blend of meaning, with the sense of "progressing in a given direction" predominating over the simple "stretching" obtainable from pocket dictionaries (see also note to Seven: iv: 14). Mr. Wilson thinks that in his own version of the coming of winter in Four, part of which I quote in my Commentary with charitably italicized errors, he is "almost literally accurate and a good deal more poetically vivid than Nabokov." The "almost" is very lenient since "loud-tongued geese" is much too lyrical, and "stretching" fails to bring out the main element of the contextual *tyanulsya*.

A still funnier sight is Mr. Wilson trying to show me how to translate properly *ego loshadka, sneg pochuya, pletyotsya rys'yu kak nibud'* (Five: ii: 3-4), which in my literal rendering is "his naggy, having sensed the snow, shambles at something like a trot." Mr. Wilson's own effort, which goes "his poor (?) horse sniffing (?) the snow, attempting (?) a trot, plods (?) through it (?)," besides being a medley of gross mistranslations, is an example of careless English. If, however, we resist the unfair temptation of imagining Mr. Wilson's horse plodding through my trot and, instead, have it plod through Mr. Wilson's snow, we obtain the inept picture of an unfortunate beast of burden laboriously working its way through that snow, whereas in reality Pushkin celebrates relief, not exertions. The peasant is not "rejoicing" or "feeling festive," as paraphrasts have it (not

* In revising my translation for a new edition I have changed "clamorous" to the absolutely exact "cronking."

knowing Pushkin's use of *torzhestvovat'* here and elsewhere), but "celebrating" (the coming of winter), since the snow under the sleigh facilitates the little nag's progress and is especially welcome after a long snowless autumn of muddy ruts and reluctant cart wheels.

Although Mr. Wilson finds my Commentary overdone, he cannot help suggesting three additions. In a ludicrous display of pseudo-scholarship he insinuates that I "seem to think" (I do not, and never did) that the application by the French of the word "goddams" to the English (which I do not even discuss) begins in the eighteenth century. He would like me to say that it goes back to the fifteenth century. Why should I? Because he looked it up?

He also would have liked me to mention in connection with the "pensive vampire" (Three: xii: 8) of Polidori's novelette (1819) another variety of vampire which Pushkin alluded to in a poem of 1834 suggested by Mérimée's well-known pastiche. But *that* vampire is the much coarser *vurdalak*, a lowly graveyard ghoul having nothing to do with the romantic allusion in Canto Three (1824); besides he appeared ten years later (and three years after Pushkin had finished *Eugene Onegin*)—quite outside the period limiting my interest in vampires.

The most sophisticated suggestion, however, volunteered by Mr. Wilson, concerns the evolution of the adjective *krasnyy* which "means both red and beautiful." May this not be influenced "by the custom in Old Russia, described in Hakluyt's *Voyages*, of the peasant women's painting large red spots on their cheeks in order to beautify themselves?" This is a preposterous gloss, somehow reminding one of Freud's explaining a patient's passion for young women by the fact that the poor fellow in his self-abusing boyhood used to admire Mt. Jungfrau from the window of a water closet.

I shall not say much about the paragraph that Mr. Wilson devotes to my notes on prosody. It is simply not worth-

while. He has skimmed my “tedious and interminable appendix” and has not understood what he managed to glean. From our conversations and correspondence in former years I well know that, like Onegin, he is incapable of comprehending the mechanism of verse—either Russian or English. This being so, he should have refrained from “criticizing” my essay on the subject. With one poke of his stubby pencil he reintroduces the wretched old muddle I take such pains to clear up and fussily puts back the “secondary accents” and “spondees” where I show they do not belong. He makes no attempt to assimilate my terminology, he obstinately ignores the similarities and distinctions I discuss, and indeed I cannot believe he has read more than a few lines of the thing.

My “most serious failure,” according to Mr. Wilson, “is one of interpretation.” Had he read my commentary with more attention he would have seen that I do not believe in *any* kind of “interpretation” so that his or my “interpretation” can be neither a failure nor a success. In other words, I do not believe in the old-fashioned, naïve, and musty method of human-interest criticism championed by Mr. Wilson that consists of removing the characters from an author’s imaginary world to the imaginary, but generally far less plausible, world of the critic who then proceeds to examine these displaced characters as if they were “real people.” In my commentary I have given examples and made some innocent fun of such criticism (steering clear, however, of any allusion to Mr. Wilson’s extraordinary misconceptions in *The Triple Thinkers*).

I have also demonstrated the factual effect of Pushkin’s characterizations as related to the structure of the poem. There are certain inconsistencies in his treatment of his hero which are especially evident, and in a way especially attractive, in the beginning of Canto Six. In a note to Six: xxviii: 7, I stress the uncanny, dreamlike quality of Onegin’s behavior just before and during the duel. It is purely a

question of architectonics—not of personal interpretation. My facts are objective and irrefutable. I remain with Pushkin in Pushkin's world. I am not concerned with Onegin's being gentle or cruel, energetic or indolent, kind or unkind ("you are simply very kindhearted," says a woman to him quoted in his diary; he is "zloy, unkind," says Mr. Wilson); I am concerned only with Pushkin's overlooking, in the interest of the plot, that Onegin, who according to Pushkin is a punctilious *homme du monde* and an experienced duelist, would hardly choose a servant for second or shoot to kill in the kind of humdrum affair where vanity is amply satisfied by sustaining one's adversary's fire without returning it.

The actual cause of the encounter is however quite plausible in Pushkin: upon finding himself at a huge vulgar feast (Five: xxxi) so unlike the informal party promised him by Lenski (Four: xlix), Onegin is quite right to be furious with his deceitful or scatterbrained young friend, just as Lenski is quite justified in calling him out for flirting with Olga. Onegin accepts the challenge instead of laughing it off as he would have done if Lenski had chosen a less pedantic second. Pushkin stresses the fact that Onegin "sincerely loves the youth" but that *amour propre* is sometimes stronger than friendship. That is all. One should stick to that and not try to think up "deep" variations which are not even new; for what Mr. Wilson inflicts upon me, in teaching me how to understand Onegin, is the old solemn nonsense of Onegin's hating and envying Lenski for being capable of idealism, devoted love, ecstatic German romanticism and the like "when he himself is so sterile and empty." Actually, it is just as easy, and just as irrelevant (yet more fashionable—Mr. Wilson is behind the times), to argue that Onegin, not Lenski, is the true idealist, that he loathes Lenski because he perceives in him the future fat swinish squire Lenski is doomed to become, and so he raises slowly his pistol and . . . but Lenski in malignant

cold blood is also raising his pistol, and God knows who would have killed whom had not the author followed wisely the old rule of sparing one's more interesting character while the novel is still developing. If anybody takes "a mean advantage," as Mr. Wilson absurdly puts it (none of the principals can derive any special "advantage" in a *duel à volonté*), it is not Onegin, but Pushkin.

So much for my "most serious failure."

All that now remains to be examined is Mr. Wilson's concern for reputations—Pushkin's reputation as a linguist and the reputations of Sainte-Beuve and others as writers.

With an intensity of feeling that he shares with Russian monolingualists who have debated the subject, Mr. Wilson scolds me for underrating Pushkin's knowledge of English and "quite disregarding the evidence." I supply the evidence, not Mr. Wilson, not Sidorov, and not even Pushkin's own father (a cocky old party who maintained that his son used to speak fluent Spanish, let alone English). Had Mr. Wilson carefully consulted my notes to One: xxxviii: 9, he would have convinced himself that I prove with absolute certainty that neither in 1821, nor 1833, nor 1836, was Pushkin able to understand simple English phrases. My demonstration remains unassailable, and it is this evidence that Mr. Wilson disregards while referring me to stale generalities or to an idiotic anecdote about the Raevski girls' giving Pushkin lessons in English in a Crimean bower. Mr. Wilson knows nothing about the question. He is not even aware that Pushkin got the style of his "Byronic" tales from Pichot and Zhukovski, or that Pushkin's copying out extracts from foreign writers means nothing. Mr. Wilson, too, may have copied extracts, and we see the results. He complains I do not want to admit that Pushkin's competence in languages was considerable, but I can only reply that Mr. Wilson's notion of such competence and my notion of it are completely dissimilar. I realize, of course, that my friend has a vested interest in the matter, but I can

assure him that although Pushkin spoke excellent eighteenth-century French, he had only a gentleman's smattering of other foreign languages.

Finally—Mr. Wilson is horrified by my “instinct to take digs at great reputations.” Well, it cannot be helped; Mr. Wilson must accept my instinct, and wait for the next crash. I refuse to be guided and controlled by a communion of established views and academic traditions, as he wants me to be. What right has he to prevent me from finding mediocre and overrated people like Balzac, Dostoevski, Sainte-Beuve, or Stendhal, that pet of all those who like their French plain? How much has Mr. Wilson enjoyed Mme. de Staël's novels? Has he ever studied Balzac's absurdities and Stendhal's clichés? Has he examined the melodramatic muddle and phony mysticism of Dostoevski? Can he really venerate that arch-vulgarian, Sainte-Beuve? And why should I be forbidden to consider that Chaykovski's hideous and insulting libretto is not saved by a music whose cloying banalities have pursued me ever since I was a curly-haired boy in a velvet box? If I am allowed to display my very special and very subjective admiration for Pushkin, Browning, Krylov, Chateaubriand, Griboedov, Senancour, Küchelbecker, Keats, Hodasevich, to name only a few of those I praise in my notes, I should be also allowed to bolster and circumscribe that praise by pointing out to the reader my favorite bogeys and shams in the hall of false fame.

In his rejoinder to my letter of August 26, 1965, in *The New York Review*, Mr. Wilson says that on rereading his article he felt it sounded “more damaging” than he had meant it to be. His article, entirely consisting, as I have shown, of quibbles and blunders, can be damaging only to his own reputation—and that is the last look I shall ever take at the dismal scene.

Completed on January 20, 1966, and published in February of that

year in *Encounter*. One or two forced peeps did come after that “last look.” The essay was reprinted in *Nabokov’s Congeries*, Viking, New York, 1968.

5

LOLITA AND MR. GIRODIAS

From time to time, in the course of the 1960s, there have appeared, over the signature of Mr. Girodias or that of some friend of his, retrospective notes pertaining to the publication of *Lolita* by The Olympia Press and to various phases of our “strained relations.” Those frivolous reminiscences invariably contained factual errors, which I generally took the trouble to point out in brief rejoinders; whereupon, as I detected with satisfaction, certain undulatory motions of retreat were performed by our flexible memoirist. An especially ambitious article, with especially serious misstatements, has now been published by him twice—in Barney Rosset’s *Evergreen Review* (No. 37, September 1965) under the title “Lolita, Nabokov, and I,” and in his own anthology (*The Olympia Reader*, Grove Press, New York, 1965) under the less elegant title of “A Sad, Ungraceful History of Lolita.” Since I have religiously preserved all my correspondence with Mr. Girodias, I am able, I trust, to induce a final retraction on his part.

Two clauses from a document in my possession entitled “Memorandum of Agreement” (“made this sixth day of June nineteen hundred and fifty five between Mr. Vladimir Nabokov, Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., and Olympia Press, 8, rue de Nesle, Paris”) might do very well as a motto

for the present occasion. Here they are in strophic form for the reader's convenience:

8

In the event of the Publishers
Going bankrupt
Or failing to make accountings and payments
As herein specified,
Then in either event the present agreement
Becomes automatically null and void
And the rights herein granted
Revert to the Author.

9

The Publishers shall render statement
Of the number of copies sold
On the 30th June and 31st December
Of each year
Within one month from these dates
Respectively
And shall make payment to the Author
At the time of such rendering of account.

The eighth stave, with its opening lines foretelling so plainly what was to happen to Mr. Girodias on December 14, 1964, and that beautiful, eloquent, almost sapphically modulated last verse ("Revert to the Author"), is of great importance for the understanding of what Mr. Girodias calls "our enigmatic conflict." It will be also noted that while devoting a lot of space to the many "disappointments" that my attitude toward him caused him, he never mentions in the course of his article the perfectly obvious reason for a writer's resenting his association with a pub-

lisher—namely, the fact of Mr. Girodias' failing repeatedly, with a kind of maniacal persistence, to live up to clause 9 of our agreement. By stressing effects and concealing causes he gives a comic slant to his account of our relations, making it seem that during ten years I kept extravagantly fuming at a puzzled benefactor.

Lolita was finished at the beginning of 1954, in Ithaca, New York. My first attempts to have it published in the U. S. proved disheartening and irritating. On August 6 of that year, from Taos, New Mexico, I wrote to Madame Ergaz, of the Bureau Littéraire Clairouin, Paris, about my troubles. She had arranged the publication in French of some of my Russian and English books; I now asked her to find somebody in Europe who would publish *Lolita* in the original English. She replied that she thought she could arrange it. A month later, however, upon my return to Ithaca (where I taught Russian Literature at Cornell) I wrote to her saying I had changed my mind. New hopes had arisen for publication in America. They petered out, and next spring I got in touch with Madame Ergaz again, writing her (Feb. 16) that Sylvia Beach "might perhaps be interested if she still publishes." This was not followed up. By April 17 Madame Ergaz had received my typescript. On April 26, 1955, a fatidic date, she said she had found a possible publisher. On May 13 she named that person. It was thus that Maurice Girodias entered my files.

Mr. Girodias in his article overemphasizes the obscurity I languished in before 1955 as well as his part in helping me to emerge from it. On the other hand, I shall be strictly truthful when I say that before Madame Ergaz mentioned his name, I was totally ignorant of his existence, or that of his enterprise. He was recommended to me as the founder of The Olympia Press, which "had recently published, among other things, *Histoire d'O*" (a novel I had heard praised by competent judges) and as the former director of the "Editions du Chêne" which had "produced books ad-

mirable from the artistic point of view.” He wanted *Lolita* not only because it was well written but because (as Mme. Ergaz informed me on May 13, 1955) “he thought that it might lead to a change in social attitudes toward the kind of love described in it.” It was a pious although obviously ridiculous thought, but high-minded platitudes are often mouthed by enthusiastic businessmen and nobody bothers to disenchant them.

I had not been in Europe since 1940, was not interested in pornographic books, and thus knew nothing about the obscene novelettes which Mr. Girodias was hiring hacks to confect with his assistance, as he relates elsewhere. I have pondered the painful question whether I would have agreed so cheerfully to his publishing *Lolita* had I been aware in May, 1955, of what formed the supple backbone of his production. Alas, I probably would, though less cheerfully.

I shall now proceed to point out a number of slippery passages and a few guileful inexactitudes in Mr. Girodias’ article. For some reason which presumably I am too naive to grasp, he starts by citing an old *curriculum vitae* of mine which, he says, was sent to him by my agent together with the typescript of *Lolita* in April, 1955. Such a procedure would have been absurd. My files show that only much later, namely on February 8, 1957, *he asked me* to send him “all the biographical and bibliographical material” available for his brochure “L’affaire *Lolita*” (which he published when fighting the ban of the book in France); on February 12, I sent him photographs, a list of published works, and a brief *curriculum vitae*. With the sneer of a hoodlum following an innocent passerby, Mr. Girodias now makes fun of such facts in it as my father’s having been “an eminent statesman” or the “considerable fame” I had acquired in émigré circles. All this he had published himself (with many embellishments and additions gleaned elsewhere) in his brochure of 1957!

On the other hand, he now tones down substantially his proud recollections of having “edited” *Lolita*. On April 22, 1960, I had been obliged to write to the editor of *The New York Times Book Review* (where Mr. Girodias had been comically flattered by a person unknown to me) thus: “Mr. Popkin in his recent article on Monsieur Girodias, the first publisher of my *Lolita*, says that I ‘did some rewriting at Girodias’ request.’ I wish to correct this absurd misstatement. The only alterations Girodias very diffidently suggested concerned a few trivial French phrases in the English text, such as ‘*bon*,’ ‘*c’est moi*,’ ‘*mais comment*,’ etc., which he thought might just as well be translated into English, and this I agreed to do.”

I began to curse my association with Olympia Press not in 1957, when our agreement was, according to Mr. Girodias, “weighing heavily” on my “dreams of impending fortune” in America, but as early as 1955; that is, the very first year of my dealings with Mr. Girodias. From the very start I was confronted with the peculiar aura surrounding his business transactions with me, an aura of negligence, evasiveness, procrastination, and falsity. I complained of these peculiarities in most of my letters to my agent who faithfully transmitted my complaints to him but these he never explains in his account of our ten-year-long (1955–65) association.

“I hardly received the proofs back” [he received them in July, 1955], writes Mr. Girodias, “when Nabokov sent me a cable [August 29, *i.e.*, after a month of Girodian silence] saying: ‘When is *Lolita* appearing. Worried. Please answer my letters’—an entreaty which has been repeated so often in so many cables sent by so many authors to so many [*i.e.*, wise, calm, benevolent] publishers . . .” The would-be wit and delightful flippancy of this remark should not fool anybody. Mr. Girodias alludes here to coy emotions typical of a young author hardly ever published before. Actually, at fifty-six years of age, I had had, since 1925, dealings—

recurrent dealings—with at least a score of publishers and had never been exposed to anything like the tissue of haggling maneuvers and abstruse prevarications in which Mr. Girodias involves his victims (perhaps not deliberately—it just seems to be part of his bizarre nature). In reality, two specific questions were worrying me, and to them I was getting no answer. The main one of the two was the question of the copyright: the book had to be registered in Washington, in the author's name, and for this purpose I had to know the exact date of publication so as to insert it in the application forms. On October 8, 1955, I received, at last, a copy of the published book, but only on November 28, after some more "entreaties," did I learn that *Lolita* had been published on September 15, 1955. The second matter was a financial one—and proved to be the *leit-motif* of what Mr. Girodias terms the "sad, ungraceful history of *Lolita*." My benefactor had agreed to pay me an advance of 400,000 "*anciens*" francs (about a thousand dollars), one half on signature of the agreement (dated June 6, 1955), and the other half on publication. He had paid his first half only one month late. My wire did not help to elucidate the date when Mr. Girodias would have to pay the second half. It was easier for him to leave the matter open. I continued reminding him about that second check. I told him (October 5) that "I write for my pleasure, but publish for money." He paid only on December 27, under strong pressure from my agent, and more than three months after the second payment was due.

My copyright worries were not over. "With blithe unconcern" (to use a phrase Mr. Girodias favors) he had added to "Copyright 1955 by V. Nabokov" on the title page of his edition the words "and the Olympia Press." On January 28, 1956, I learned from the copyright Office in Washington that this matey formula (for which I had not given my permission) might cause trouble at re-publication in the U.S. which had to take place within five years. I was

advised to get an "assignment or quitclaim" from Mr. Girodias, and this I at once asked him to send me. I got no reply (as "so many authors" do not get replies from "so many publishers"), wrote to him again and again, but only on April 20 (*i.e.*, three months later) got from him what I asked. It is interesting to conjecture where Mr. Girodias would have been, when "our" book came out in America, had I not had the foresight to protect it there.

By the beginning of 1957, I had still not received from Olympia any statements of accounts since the publication of the book in September 1955. The lapse entitled me to annul the agreement (see Clause 9), but I decided to wait a little longer. I had to wait till March 28, 1957, and when it came, the statement did not cover the entire period for which it was due.

The nuisance of non-statements did not fail to resume. By the end of August, 1957, I had received none for the first semester of that year which was due on July 31. On September 2, Mr. Girodias asked for a postponement of two months, and I agreed to wait till September 30, but nothing happened, and having had enough of that nonsense I advised him (October 5) that all rights had reverted to me. He promptly paid up (44,220 *anciens* francs), and I relented.

In a particularly nasty and silly passage our memoirist juxtaposes my refusal to defend my book in France from the attack of local magistrates and "Philistine readers" (as I wrote to him on March 10, 1957) with my requesting him (a month earlier) to avoid mentioning "Cornell" when referring to me in publicity splashes as a "university professor." I am not sure what he means specifically. Only a very helical mind could twist my request into a semblance of frailty. By signing *Lolita* I had shown my complete acceptance of whatever responsibility an author has to take; but as long as an unhealthy flurry of scandal surrounded my innocent *Lolita*, I certainly was justified in acting as I

did, lest a shadow of my responsibility fall on the university that had given me unbelievable freedom in conducting my courses (they were never meddled with by the department or departments under which they were nominally listed); nor did I care to embarrass the close friend who had brought me there to enjoy that true academic freedom.

Nevertheless Mr. Girodias kept urging me to join him in his campaign against French censorship. "Our interests are identical," he wrote; but they were not. He wanted me to defend *Lolita*, but I did not see how my book could be treated separately from his list of twenty or so lewd books. I did not want to defend even *Lolita*. He repeats in his article one of his favorite arguments that without him *Lolita* would have never been published. As I wrote him on August 3, 1957, I was (and am) deeply grateful to him for printing that book. But I must also point out to him that he was not the right person to undertake the thing; he lacked the means to launch *Lolita* properly—a book that differed so utterly in vocabulary, structure, and purpose (or rather absence of purpose) from his other much simpler commercial ventures, such as *Debby's Bidet* or *Tender Thighs*. Mr. Girodias greatly exaggerates his powers. Had not Graham Greene and John Gordon clashed in London in such providential fashion, *Lolita*—especially its second volume which repelled so-called "amateurs"—might have ended in the common grave of Traveler's Favorites or whatever Olympia's little green books were called.

In 1957, the *Lolita* affair entered its American phase, which to me was in every way more important than its Olympia one. Jason Epstein, by championing the publication of a considerable portion of *Lolita* in the summer issue, 1957, of *Anchor Review*, edited by Melvin J. Lasky (Doubleday, New York), and Professor F. W. Dupee, by prefacing that portion with a brilliant article, helped to make the idea of an American edition acceptable. Several publishers were interested in it, but the difficulties Mr.

Girodias created in our negotiations with American firms were another source of acute vexation on my part. On September 14, 1957, the head of a distinguished American publishing house flew over to Paris to discuss matters with Mr. Girodias. The latter's account of the interview runs like this in his article: "One publisher spontaneously offered a 20 percent royalty to get the book, but was then apparently frightened away by Nabokov's attitude when he met him later in New York." One part of this passage is inaccurate and the other simply untrue: it was not I who dissuaded this particular publisher, but his partner. The account is inaccurate because Mr. Girodias does not say who was to get most of that 20 percent. "I am prepared to accept this proposal," wrote Mr. Girodias to me (apparently under the impression that he had got a definite offer which was not the case), "if my share is assured at 12¹/₂ percent. The advance would be shared in the same proportion. Would you accept 7¹/₂ percent as your share? I consider my claim justified and fair." My agent wrote that she was "*outrée de ces prétentions*." (His contract obliged him to pay me a 10 percent royalty up to ten thousand copies, and 12 percent after that.)

The interim copyright stipulated that no more than 1500 copies should be imported into the U.S. Mr. Girodias rather resented my keeping an eagle eye on his lighthearted transatlantics. I knew for instance that copies of his edition were being sold for \$12 and more in New York. He assured me that the difference was pocketed by the retailers. On November 30, 1957, Mr. Girodias wrote in a mellow mood "I admit that I have been wrong on several occasions in the course of our dealings. . . ." He added that he no longer "requested a larger share of the proceeds" of the American edition and that he was canceling his "alternative project" of bringing out his own "American reprint"—a silly threat, the carrying out of which would have been his undoing. But already by December 16, 1957,

he was larking again: On that day I learnt with wonder from my agent that Mr. Girodias declared he had sold only *eight* copies in America in three months (April to June) but that since I thought he had done so at a higher price than shown in his statements (\$7.50) he was sending me the difference, a check for 50 cents. And he added that he considered all our differences now settled!

It would be tedious to continue giving instances of the delayed or incomplete statements of accounts that marked Mr. Girodias' course of action during the following years or of such misdemeanors as publishing in Paris a reprint of his edition of *Lolita* with his own introduction (in intolerably bad English) without my permission—which he knew I would never have given. What always made me regret our association were not “dreams of impending fortune,” not my “hating” him “for having stolen a portion of Nabokov's property,” but the obligation to endure the elusiveness, the evasiveness, the procrastination, the dodges, the duplicity, and the utter irresponsibility of the man. This is why, on May 28, 1959, before sailing for Europe after exactly 19 years of absence, I wrote to Mme. Ergaz that I did not wish to make the acquaintance of Mr. Girodias when I came to Paris for the launching of the French translation of *Lolita*. As revealed now by his *Evergreen* article, the depths of his personality are even less attractive than they seemed when showing through our correspondence. I suspect that much of the rudeness in his article is the result of his relying too heavily on a journalistic style, redolent, perhaps, of Gallic levity but sadly wanting in English precision. Anyway, I shall not discuss here the insolent and vulgar remarks he makes in regard to my wife (idiotically insinuating, for instance, that certain editorial comments in *Life International*, July 6, 1959, were written by her though signed “ED”).

Let me repeat: I have never met Mr. Girodias. He has been described as “fascinating,” and “debonair,” and “exuding French charm”; that is about all I have to go upon

when trying to picture him to myself as a physical being (his moral aspect I know well enough). However, half-a-dozen years after the beginning of our gappy correspondence, he suddenly proclaimed in a *Playboy* article ("Pornologist on Olympus," April, 1961) that we had been actually introduced to each other at a cocktail party given by Gallimard on October 23, 1959, in Paris, despite my warning my agent I did not want to meet him. The details he gave were so absurd that I saw myself obliged to call his bluff, and did so in the July issue of *Playboy*, 1961. Instead of the stunned silence that I expected would last for ever, Mr. Girodias after brooding on my little note and his imaginary past during the next four years, comes up now with a new version of the event in his *Evergreen* piece. The discrepancies between the two variants are typical of what scholars call "waning" apocrypha. In *Playboy* we have a classical description of "the members of Gallimard family" looking "horrified" while Mr. Girodias "slowly progressed toward the author through a sea of bodies" (a splendid image, that sea). In *Evergreen*, there are no Gallimards, but we find, instead, Monique Grall "doubled over in helpless mirth, in a corner" and another lady, Doussia Ergaz, "hiding in a corner" (*i.e.*, another corner) and, most unconvincingly, "choking on a macaroon." In the *Playboy* codex, Mme. Ergaz is described as Mr. Nabokov's "literary agent and patient supporter." In the *Evergreen* scroll, she has become Mr. Girodias' "dear, suffering, terrified friend." In *Playboy*, he and I exchange a few "not unfriendly" sentences. In *Evergreen*, the great meeting is wordless: I limit myself to a "vacuous grin" and immediately turn away to talk "ardently" to a "Czech reporter" (an unexpected and rather sinister personage of whom one would like to hear more from our chronicler). Finally, and rather disappointingly, the passage in *Playboy* about the quaint way I "plunged backwards and sideways with the easy grace of a dolphin" is now replaced by the "graceful ease of a circus

seal"; whereupon Mr. Girodias "went to the bar and had a drink" (plain *Playboy*) or "went to down a few glasses of champagne" (lush *Evergreen*).

As I pointed out in my rejoinder, even if Mr. Girodias was introduced to me (which I doubt), I did not catch his name; but what especially invalidates the general veracity of his account is the little phrase he slips in about my having "very obviously recognized" him as he was slowly swimming toward me amid the "bodies." Very obviously, I could not have recognized somebody I had never seen in my life; nor can I insult his sanity by suggesting he assumed I had somehow obtained his picture (in the days of the famous *curriculum vitae*) and had been cherishing it all those years.

I am looking forward to Mr. Girodias' third version of our mythical meeting. Perhaps he will discover at last that he had crashed the wrong party and talked to a Slovak poet who was being fêted next door.

Written on February 15, 1966, and published in *Evergreen Review*, XLV, February, 1967. I have not heard from Mr. Girodias since 1965.

6

ON ADAPTATION

Here is a literal translation of a great poem by Mandelshtam (note the correct form of his name), which appears in the original Russian on pp. 142 and 144 of Olga Carlisle's anthology *Poets on Street Corners* (Random House, New York, 1968). It consists of sixteen tetrametric (odd) and trimetric (even) anapaestic lines with a masculine rhyme scheme *bcbc*.

1 For the sake of the resonant valor of ages to come,
for the sake of a high race of men,
I forfeited a bowl at my fathers' feast,
4 and merriment, and my honor.

On my shoulders there pounces the wolfhound age,
but no wolf by blood am I;
better, like a fur cap, thrust me into the sleeve
8 of the warmly fur-coated Siberian steppes,

——so that I may not see the coward, the bit of soft
muck,
the bloody bones on the wheel,
so that all night the blue-fox furs may blaze
12 for me in their pristine beauty.

Lead me into the night where the Enisey flows,
and the pine reaches up to the star,
because no wolf by blood am I,
16 and injustice has twisted my mouth.

A number of details in the text are ambiguous (for example, the word translated as “coward” is a homonym of the old Russian *trus*, meaning “quaking” (thus “earthquake”), and the word translated as “injustice” has the additional meaning of “falsehood”), but I will limit myself to discussing some of the quite unambiguous passages misinterpreted, or otherwise mangled, by Robert Lowell in his “adaptation” on pp. 143 and 145 of the same collection.

Line 1, “resonant valor,” *gremuchaya doblest'* (nom.): Mandelshtam improves here on the stock phrase “ringing glory” (*gremyashchaya slava*). Mr. Lowell renders this as “foreboding nobility,” which is meaningless, both as translation and adaptation, and can be only explained by assuming that he worked out an ominous meaning from the “rumbling” improperly given under *gremuchiy* (see also *gremuchaya zmeya*, rattlesnake) by some unhelpful informer, e.g. Louis Segal, M.A., Ph.D. (Econ.), D. Phil., compiler of a Russian-English dictionary.

Line 5, “wolfhound,” *volkodav*: lexically “wolf-crusher,” “wolf-strangler”; this dog gets transformed by Mr. Lowell into a “cutthroat wolf,” another miracle of misinformation, mistransfiguration, and misadaptation.

Line 6, “wear the hide of a wolf” (Lowell) would mean to impersonate a wolf, which is not at all the sense here.

Line 8, actually “of the Siberian prairie’s hot furcoat,” *zharkoy shuby sibirskih stepey*. The rich heavy pelisse, to which Russia’s wild East is likened by the poet (this being the very blazon of its faunal opulence) is demoted by the adapter to a “sheepskin” which is “shipped to the steppes” with the poet in its sleeve. Besides being absurd in itself, this singular importation totally destroys the imagery of the

composition. And a poet's imagery is a sacred, unassailable thing.

Lines 11–12: the magnificent metaphor of line 8 now culminates in a vision of the arctic starlight overhead, emblemized by the splendor of gray-blue furs, with a suggestion of astronomical heraldry (cf. *Vulpecula*, a constellation). Instead of that the adaptor has “I want to run with the shiny blue foxes moving like dancers in the night,” which is not so much a pretty piece of pseudo-Russian fairytale as a foxtrot in Disneyland.

Line 13: Why does the adaptation read “there the Siberian river is glass”? Perhaps, because the *techyot* (flows) of the text gives *tekla* in the past tense feminine, and its form *stekla* (flowed down) also happens to be the genitive case of *steklo* (glass)—a really outstanding howler, if my supposition is correct, and an inexplicable cliché, if it isn't.

Line 14, “pine,” *sosna*: the adapter has “fir tree,” another plant altogether. This is a mistake often committed on both sides of the Bering Strait (and condoned, I note, by Dr. Segal).

Line 16: “or slaver in the wolf trap's steel jaw” (Lowell)—an ending that snaps as it were the very backbone of Mandelshtam's poem.

I am well aware that my laborious literal reproduction of one of the masterpieces of Russian poetry is prevented by the rigor of fierce fidelity from parading as a good English poem; but I am also aware that it is true translation, albeit stiff and rhymeless, and that the adapter's good poem is nothing but a farrago of error and improvisation defacing the even better poem it faces in the anthology. When I think that the American college student of today, so docile, so trustful, so eager to be led to any bright hell by an eccentric teacher, will mistake that adaptation for a sample of Mandelshtam's thought (“the poet compares the sheepskin sent him from abroad to the wolf hide he refuses to wear”), I cannot help feeling that despite the good inten-

tions of adapters something very like cruelty and deception is the inevitable result of their misguided labors.

Although some of the English versions in Miss Carlisle's collection do their best to follow the text, all of them for some reason or other (perhaps in heroic protection of the main offender) are branded "Adaptations." What, then, is there especially adaptive or adaptational in an obvious travesty? This I wish to be told, this I wish to comprehend. "Adapted" to what? To the needs of an idiot audience? To the demands of good taste? To the level of one's own genius? But one's audience is the most varied and gifted in the world; no arbiter of genteel arts tells us what we can or can't say; and as to genius, nowhere in those paraphrases is the height of fancy made to fuse with the depth of erudition, like a mountain orbed by its reflection in a lake—which at least would be some consolation. What we do have are crude imitations, with hops and flutters of irresponsible invention weighed down by the blunders of ignorance. If this kind of thing becomes an international fashion I can easily imagine Robert Lowell himself finding one of his best poems, whose charm is in its concise, delicate touches (" . . . splinters fall in sawdust from the aluminum-plant wall . . . wormwood . . . three pairs of glasses . . . leathery love") adapted in some other country by some eminent, blissfully monolingual foreign poet, assisted by some American expatriate with a not-too-extensive vocabulary in any language. An outraged pedant, wishing to inform and defend our poet, might then translate the adaptation back into English (" . . . I saw dusty paint split and fall like aluminum stocks on Wall Street . . . six glasses of absinthe . . . the football of passion"). I wonder on whose side the victim would be.

Written on September 20, 1969, and published on December 4, 1969, in *The New York Review of Books*. I fervently hope that this little essay managed to reach the poet's widow in Soviet Russia.

7

ANNIVERSARY NOTES

My first intention was to write an elaborate paper on this *TriQuarterly* number (17, Winter 1970, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois) which is dedicated to me on the occasion of my seventieth birthday. I soon realized, however, that I might find myself discussing critical studies of my fiction, something I have always avoided doing. True, a festschrift is a very special and rare occasion for that kind of sport, but I did not wish to create even the shadow of a precedent and therefore decided simply to publish the rough jottings I made as an objective reader anxious to eliminate slight factual errors of which such a marvelous gift must be free; for I knew what pains the editors, Charles Newman and Alfred Appel, had taken to prepare it and remembered how firmly the guest co-editor, when collecting the ingredients of this great feast, refused to show me any plum or crumb before publication.

BUTTERFLIES

Butterflies are among the most thoughtful and touching contributions to this volume. The old-fashioned engraving

of a *Catagramma*-like insect is delightfully reproduced twelve times so as to suggest a double series or “block” of specimens in a cabinet case; and there is a beautiful photograph of a Red Admirable (but “*Nymphalidae*” is the family to which it belongs, not its genus, which is *Vanessa*—my first bit of carping).

ALFRED APPEL, JR.

Mr. Appel, guest co-editor, writes about my two main works of fiction. His essay “Backgrounds of *Lolita*” is a superb example of the rare case where art and erudition meet in a shining ridge of specific information (the highest and to me most acceptable function of literary criticism). I would have liked to say more about his findings but modesty (a virtue that the average reviewer especially appreciates in authors) denies me that pleasure.

His other piece in this precious collection is “*Ada Described*.” I planted three blunders, meant to ridicule mistranslations of Russian classics, in the first paragraph of my *Ada*: the opening sentence of *Anna Karenin* (no additional “a,” printer, she was not a ballerina) is turned inside out; Anna Arkadievna’s patronymic is given a grotesque masculine ending; and the title of Tolstoy’s family chronicle has been botched by the invented Stoner or Lower (I must have received at least a dozen letters with clarifications and corrections from indignant or puzzled readers, some of them of Russian origin, who never read *Ada* beyond the first page). Furthermore, in the same important paragraph, “Mount Tabor” and “Pontius” allude respectively to the transfigurations and betrayals to which great texts are subjected by pretentious and ignorant versionists. The present statement is an amplification of Mr. Appel’s remarks on the subject in his brilliant essay “*Ada De-*

scribed.” I confess that his piece was a great pleasure to read, but one error in it I really must correct: My Baltic Baron is totally and emphatically unrelated to Mr. Norman Mailer, the writer.

SIMON KARLINSKY

Mr. Karlinsky’s “N. and Chekhov” is a very remarkable essay, and I greatly appreciate being with A. P. in the same boat—on a Russian lake, at sunset, he fishing, I watching the hawkmoths above the water. Mr. Karlinsky has put his finger on a mysterious sensory cell. He is right, I do love Chekhov dearly. I fail, however, to rationalize my feeling for him: I can easily do so in regard to the greater artist, Tolstoy, with the flash of this or that unforgettable passage (“... how sweetly she said: ‘and even very much’ ”—Vronsky recalling Kitty’s reply to some trivial question that we shall never know), but when I imagine Chekhov with the same detachment all I can make out is a medley of dreadful prosaisms, ready-made epithets, repetitions, doctors, unconvincing vamps, and so forth; yet it is *his* works which I would take on a trip to another planet.

In another article—on “N.’s Russified Lewis Carroll”—the same critic is much too kind to my *Anya in Wonderland* (1924). How much better I could have done it fifteen years later! The only good bits are the poems and the word-play. I find an odd blunder in the “Song of the Soup”: *lohan*’ (a kind of bucket) is misspelt by me and twisted into the wrong gender. Incidentally, I had not (and still have not) seen any other Russian versions of the book (as Mr. Karlinsky suggests I may have had) so that my sharing with Poliksena Solovyov the same model for one of the parodies is a coincidence. I recall with pleasure that one of the accidents that prompted Wellesley College to engage me as

lecturer in the early forties was the presence of my rare *Anya* in the Wellesley collection of Lewis Carroll editions.

ROBERT ALTER

Mr. Alter's essay on the "Art of Politics in *Invitation to a Beheading*" is a most brilliant reflection of that book in a reader's mind. It is practically flawless so that all I can add is that I particularly appreciated his citing a passage from *The Gift* "that could serve as a useful gloss on the entire nature of political and social reality in the earlier novel."

STANLEY EDGAR HYMAN

Mr. Hyman in his first-rate piece "The Handle" discusses *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*, the two bookends of grotesque design between which my other volumes tightly huddle. I am a great admirer of Ransom's poem about Captain Carpenter aptly mentioned by Mr. Hyman.

DABNEY STUART

I must point out two fascinating little mistakes in Mr. Stuart's very interesting "*Laughter in the Dark: Dimensions of Parody*": (1) The film in which my heroine is given a small part in the 1920s has nothing to do with Garbo's *Anna Karenina* (of which incidentally I have only seen stills); but what I would like my readers to brood over is my singular power of prophecy, for the name of the leading lady (Dorianna Karenina) in the picture invented by me in 1928 prefigured that of the actress (Anna Karina) who was to

play Margot forty years later in the film *Laughter in the Dark*; and (2) Mr. Stuart cleverly toys with the idea that Albert Albinus and Axel Rex are “doubles,” one of his main clues being that Margot finds Albinus’ telephone number not under “A” but under “R” in the directory. Actually that “R” is a mere slip or typo (the initial corresponds correctly to the man’s name in the first English-language edition of the novel, London, 1936).

GEORGE STEINER

Mr. Steiner’s article (“Extraterritorial”) is built on solid abstractions and opaque generalizations. A few specific items can be made out and should be corrected. He absurdly overestimates Oscar Wilde’s mastery of French. It is human but a little cheap on his part to chide my Van Veen for sneering at my *Lolita* (which, in a transfigured form, I magnanimously turned over to a transposed fellow author); it might be wiser for him to read *Ada* more carefully than did the morons whom he rightly condemns for having dismissed as hermetic a writer’s limpid and precise prose. To one piece of misinformation I must strongly object: I never belonged to the “*haute bourgeoisie*” to which he grimly assigns me (rather like that Marxist reviewer of my *Speak, Memory* who classified my father as a “plutocrat” and a “man of affairs”!). The Nabokovs have been soldiers and squires since (at least) the fifteenth century.

BARBARA HELDT MONTER

In her otherwise impeccable little piece “*Spring in Fialta: The Choice that Mimics Chance*,” Mrs. Barbara Monter

makes a slight bibliographic mistake. She implies that I wrote the Russian original of the story sometime around 1947, in America. This is not so. It was written at least a dozen years earlier, in Berlin, and was first published in Paris ("Vesna v Fial'te," *Sovremennyya Zapiski*, 1936) long before being collected in the Chekhov House edition, New York, 1956. The English translation (by Peter Pertzov and me) appeared in *Harper's Bazaar*, May, 1947.

JEFFREY LEONARD

I am not sure that Mr. Leonard has quite understood what Van Veen means by his "texture of time" in the penultimate part of *Ada*. First of all, whatever I may have said in an old interview, it is not the entire novel but only that one part (as Alfred Appel correctly points out elsewhere) in which the illustrative metaphors, all built around one viatic theme, gradually accumulate, come to life, and form a story turning on Van's ride from the Grisons to the Valais—after which the thing again disintegrates and reverts to abstraction on a last night of solitude in a hotel in Vaud. In other words, it is all a structural trick: Van's theory of time has no existence beyond the fabric of one part of the novel *Ada*. In the second place, Mr. Leonard has evidently not grasped what is meant by "texture"; it is something quite different from what Proust called "lost time," and it is precisely in everyday life, in the waiting-rooms of life's stations that we can concentrate on the "feeling" of time and palpate its very texture. I also protest against his dragging "Antiterra," which is merely an ornamental incident, into a discussion whose only rightful field is Part Four and not the entire novel. And finally I owe no debt whatsoever (as Mr. Leonard seems to think) to the famous Argentine essayist and his rather confused compilation "A New Refutation of

Time." Mr. Leonard would have lost less of it had he gone straight to Berkeley and Bergson.

NINA BERBEROVA

In Miss Berberov's excellent article on *Pale Fire* I find a couple of minute mistakes: Kinbote begs "dear Jesus" to relieve him of his fondness for faunlets, not to cure his headache, as she implies; and Professor Pnin, whose presence in that novel Miss Berberov overlooks, *does* appear in person (note to line 949, *Pale Fire*), with his dog. She is much better, however, at delineating the characters in my novels than in describing V. Sirin, one of my characters in "real" life. In her second article, on "N. in the Thirties" (from her recent memoirs, *The Italics Are Mine*), she permits herself bizarre inaccuracies. I may be absentminded, I may be too frank about my literary tastes, okay, but I would like Miss Berberov to cite one specific instance of my having read a book that I had never read. In my preface (June 25, 1959) to the English-language edition of *Invitation to a Beheading* I have more to say about that kind of nonsense. Then there is a sartorial detail in her memoir that I must set straight. Never did I possess, in Paris or elsewhere, "a tuxedo Rachmaninov had given [me]." I had not met Rachmaninov before leaving France for America in 1940. He had twice sent me small amounts of money, through friends, and I was eager now to thank him in person. During our first meeting at his flat on West End Avenue, I mentioned I had been invited to teach summer school at Stanford. On the following day I got from him a carton with several items of obsolete clothing, among which was a cutaway (presumably tailored in the period of the Prelude), which he hoped—as he said in a kind little note—I would wear for my first lecture. I sent back his well-meant gift but

(gulp of *mea culpa*!) could not resist telling one or two people about it. Half a dozen years later, when Miss Berberov migrated to New York in her turn, she must have heard the anecdote from one of our common friends, Karpovich or Kerenski, after which a quarter of a century elapsed, or rather collapsed, and somehow, in her mind, the cutaway was transformed into a “tuxedo” and transferred to an earlier era of my life. I doubt that I had any occasion in Paris, in the thirties, when the short series of my brief encounters with Miss Berberov took place, to wear my old London dinner jacket; certainly not for that dinner at *L’Ours* (with which, incidentally, the “Ursus” of *Ada* and the *Medved*’ of St. Petersburg have nothing to do); anyway, I do not see how any of my clothes could have resembled the doubly anachronistic hand-me-down in which the memoirist rigs me out. How much kinder she is to my books!

PETER LUBIN

The multicolored inklings offered by Mr. Lubin in his “Kickshaws and Motley” are absolutely dazzling. Such things as his “*v uglou*” [Russ. for “in the corner”] in the igloo of the globe [a blend of “glow” and “strobe”] are better than anything I have done in that line. Very beautifully he tracks down to their lairs in Eliot three terms queried by a poor little person in *Pale Fire*. I greatly admire the definition of tmesis (Type I) as a “semantic petticoat slipped on between the naked noun and its clothing epithet,” as well as Lubin’s “proleptic” tmesis illustrated by Shakespeare’s glow-worm beginning “to pale his ineffectual fire.” And the parody of an interview with N. (though a little more exquisitely iridized than my own replies would have been) is sufficiently convincing to catch readers.

LUCIE LÉON NOEL

The extent to which I was concerned with the fragility of my English at the time of my abandoning Russian in 1939 may be gauged by the fact that even after Mrs. Léon had gone over the manuscript of my *Sebastian Knight* in Paris where it was written, and I had moved to the USA, I begged the late Agnes Perkins, the admirable Head of the English Department at Wellesley, to assist me in reading the galleys of the book (bought for \$150 in 1941, by New Directions), and that later, another kind lady, Sylvia Berkman, checked the grammar of my first English stories that appeared in *The Atlantic* in the early forties.

I am sorry that Lucie Léon in her amiably modulated "Playback" does not speak more than she does of her brother Alex Ponizovski of whom I was very fond (I particularly like recalling the streak of quiet eccentricity that endeared him to fellow students at Cambridge, such as the time he casually swallowed the contents of a small bottle of ink that happened to be within reach while we sat and talked by the fire). In her account of a dinner with James Joyce in Paris, I found it refreshing to be accused of bashfulness (after finding so frequently in the gazettes complaints of my "arrogance"); but is her impression correct? She pictures me as a timid young artist; actually I was forty, with a sufficiently lucid awareness of what I had already done for Russian letters preventing me from feeling awed in the presence of any living writer. (Had Mrs. Léon and I met more often at parties she might have realized that I am always a disappointing guest, neither inclined nor able to shine socially.)

Another little error occurs in the reference to the palindrome that I wrote in her album. There was nothing new about a reversible sentence in Russian: the anonymous sandglass "*a roza upala na lapu Azora*" ("and the rose fell

upon Azor's paw") is as familiar to children as, in another nursery, "able was I ere I saw Elba." The first line of my *Kazak* is, in fact, not mine (I *think* it was given me by the late Vladimir Piotrovski, a wonderfully skillful poet); what I claimed was new referred to my expanding the palindrome into a rhymed quatrain with its three last verses making continuous sense in spite of each being reversible.

IRWIN WEIL

Curiously enough, the note appended to my *Kazak* by Irwin Weil (who contributes an interesting essay on my "Odyssey" elsewhere in the volume) also requires correction. His statement that "the third and fourth lines are each palindromes if one excludes the last [?] syllables" is quite wrong; all four lines are palindromes, and no "last syllables" have to be excluded.* Especially regrettable is Mr. Weil's mistranslation of one of them. He has confused the Russian word for aloes (a genus of plant) with *aloe*, which means "red" or "rosy," and that, too, is mistranslated, becoming "purple"!

I must also question an incomprehensible statement in Mr. Weil's article "Odyssey of a Translator." The Russian lawyer E. M. Kulisher may well have been "an old acquaintance" of my father's, but he was not "close to the Nabokov family" (I do not remember him as a person) and I have never said anywhere what Mr. Weil has me indicate in the opening paragraph of his article.

* This error is due to a faulty transcription of the palindrome on p. 218 of *TriQuarterly* 17. The Russian word *rvat'*, the first word of line four, has been placed at the end of line three. The errors in the transcription and note (p. 217) will be corrected in the paperback edition of the volume, to be published this fall by Simon and Schuster.

MORRIS BISHOP

My old friend Morris Bishop (my only close friend on the campus) has touched me very deeply by his recollections of my stay at Cornell. I am assigning an entire chapter to it in my *Speak On, Mnemosyne*, a memoir devoted to the 20 years I spent in my adopted country, after dwelling for 20 years in Russia and for as many more in Western Europe. My friend suggests that I was bothered by the students' incompetence in my Pushkin class. Not at all. What bothered and angered me was the ineptitude of the system of Scientific Linguistics at Cornell.

ROSS WETZSTEON

I remember most of the best students in my Cornell classes. Mr. Wetzsteon was one of them. My "*Bleak House* diagram," which he recalls so movingly, is preserved among my papers and will appear in the collection of lectures (*Bleak House*, *Mansfield Park*, *Madame Bovary*, etc.) that I mean to publish some day. It is strange to think that never again shall I feel between finger and thumb the cool smoothness of virgin chalk or make that joke about the "gray board" (improperly wiped), and be rewarded by two or three chuckles (RW? AA? NS?).

JULIAN MOYNAHAN

Mr. Moynahan in his charming "*Lolita* and Related Memories" recalls his professor of Russian, the late Dr. Leonid Strakhovski (most foreign-born lecturers used to be "doctors"). I knew him, he did not really resemble my Pnin. We met at literary parties in Berlin half a century ago. He

wrote verse. He wore a monocle. He had no sense of humor. He dwelt in dramatic detail on his military and civil adventures. Most of his yarns had a knack of fading out at the critical point. He had worked as a trolley car driver and had run over a man. The rowboat in which he escaped from Russia developed a leak in the middle of the Baltic. When asked what happened then, he would wave a limp hand in the Russian gesture of despair and dismissal.

ELLENDIA PROFFER

Ellendia Proffer's report on my Russian readers is both heartening and sad. "All Soviet age groups," she observes, "tend to feel that literature has a didactic function." This marks a kind of dead end, despite a new generation of talented people. "*Zhalkiy udel* (piteous fate)," as the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* says *à propos de bottes* (March 4, 1970).

STANLEY ELKIN

Several passages in Mr. Elkin's "Three Meetings," a parody of an "I remember . . ." piece, are extremely funny, such as the farcical variety of repetition or the casual reference to the "lovely eggal forms" he and I encountered on "an expedition up the Orinoco." And our third meeting is a scream.

ROBERT P. HUGHES

Mr. Hughes in his "Notes on the Translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*" is one of the few critics who noticed the poetry of the Tamara terraces with their metamorphosed tama-

racks. In the trance of objectivity which the reading of the festschrift has now induced in me, I am able to say that Mr. Hughes' discussion of the trials and triumphs attending that translation is very subtle and rewarding.

CARL R. PROFFER

Mr. Proffer, who discusses another translation, that of my much older *Korol', Dama, Valet*, tackles a more ungrateful task, first because *King, Queen, Knave* "does not surmount its original weaknesses," and secondly because revision and adaptation blur one's interest in faithfulnesses. He wonders what "worse sins" (than planning the murder of his uncle) cowardly and brutal Franz could have committed between the twenties and sixties in Germany, but a minute's thought should reveal to the reader what the activities of that type of man could have been at the exact center of the interval. Mr. Proffer ends his "A New Deck for Nabokov's Knaves" by saying he expects the English version of *Mashenka* to be quite different from the Russian original. Expectation has been the undoing of many a shrewd gambler.

W. B. SCOTT

I had read and hugely enjoyed Mr. Scott's essay on my *EO* translation, "The Cypress Veil," when it first appeared in the Winter, 1965, issue of the *TriQuarterly*. It is a most refreshing piece. My improved cab is now ready for publication.

Mr. Scott is also responsible for the last item in the volume, a letter addressed by Timofey Pnin to "Many respected Professor Apple [sic]," a stunning affair in which

scholarship and high spirits interlace to produce the monogram of a very special masterpiece. And that frozen frenzy of footnotes!

SAUL STEINBERG

There is magic in every penstroke and curlicue of the delightful diploma that Saul Steinberg has drawn for my wife and me.

R. M. ADAMS

Mr. Adams' letter about me addressed to "M. le Baron de Stendhal" is an extremely witty piece—reminding me, I do not know why, of those macabre little miracles that chess problemists call *suimates* (White forces Black to win in a certain number of moves).

ANTHONY BURGESS

In Mr. Burgess' poem I particularly appreciate his Maltese grocer's cat that likes to sit upon the scales and is found to weigh 2 rotolos.

ALBERT J. GUERARD

"Not even Colette," says Mr. Guerard in his tribute to *Ada*, "rendered fleshly textures and tones with such grace." The lady is mentioned in *Ada*.

HERBERT GOLD

Blending fact and fiction in a kind of slat-sign shimmer, Mr. Gold recalls our meetings in upstate New York and in a Swiss hotel. I recall with pleasure my correspondence with the puzzled editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* for which he had written what I had thought was to be an interview with me—or, at least, with the person I usually impersonate in Montreux.

RICHARD HOWARD

Mr. Howard's poem "Waiting for Ada" contains a wonderful description of a Grand Hotel du Miroir very like some of the "nearly pearly nougat-textured art-nouveau" places where I have been "working wickedly away" during recent *séjours* in Italy.

JOHN UPDIKE

I am grateful to Mr. Updike for mentioning, in his stylish tribute, the little Parisian prostitute whom Humbert Humbert recalls so wistfully. On the other hand there was no reason at all for that harsh and contemptuous reference to a small publishing house which brought out excellent editions of four books of mine.

R. H. W. DILLARD

Mr. Dillard's poem "A day, a country home" is most attractive—especially the "light through the leaves, like butterflies" in the fourth stanza.

HORTENSE CALISHER

Miss Calisher's contubernal contribution expresses in a sophisticated metaphor her readiness to share the paranoia of her fellow writers. Oddly enough, even the best tent is absolutely dependent on the kind of country amidst which it is pitched.

JACK LUDWIG

I remember, not without satisfaction, how fiercely and frequently, during my last year of high school in Russia (which was also the first year of the revolution), most of my teachers and some of my schoolmates accused me of being a "foreigner" because I refused to join in political declarations and demonstrations. Mr. Ludwig in his splendid little article indicates with great sympathy and acumen the possibility of similar accusations being made by my new fellow-citizens. They could not vie with Vladimir Vasilievich Gippius, my fiery, redhaired teacher of Russian literature.

J. BARTH

Dear Mr. B.:

Thanks for your birthday greetings. Let me wish you many returns of the same day. How many nice people crowd around my cradle! It is pleasant to know you like Max Planck. I rather like him, too. But not Cervantes!

Yours cordially,
V. N.

CLARENCE BROWN

Lines 31–32 of Mr. Brown's fascinating poem in Russian display a looping-the-loop inversion of which old Lomonosov might have been proud: "Why, better of Dante's Hell for him to burn in the seventh circle" if translated lexically. His cartoons in a British weekly are marvelous.

CHARLES NEWMAN

The editor of the *TriQuarterly*, in "Americanization of V. N." (an exhilarating physical process in the present case!) recalls taking *Pale Fire* "to Basic Training in hot Texas," tearing it from its binding, and keeping it "pure and scrolled in my Fatigues' long pocket like a Bowie knife" safe from the Barracks Sergeant. It is a beautifully written, and most touching, epic.

DAVID WAGONER

Laughter in the Dark is paid a suitable tribute in Mr. Wagoner's sinister poem.

RICHARD STERN

I like the epithets "opulent, triplicitous," in Mr. Stern's lines, but I am not sure that any of the four Karamazovs (grotesque, humorless, hysterical, and jejune, respectively) can be defined as "triste."

ANDREW FIELD

My good friend, Mr. Field, has contributed some brilliantly worded remarks, one of which refers to V.N.'s being "counted upon to observe the hoisting of his statue (Peter the Great seated upon an invisible horse)." This reminded me suddenly of a not-unsimilar event in California where some fancy statuary, lovingly erected by a Russian group to commemorate Pushkin's duel, partly disintegrated after a couple of years' exposure, removing Pushkin but leaving intact the figure of magnificent Dantes pointing his pistol at posterity.

BROCK BROWER

The "socio-political nature" of Mr. Brower's tribute to *Lolita*, far from being repugnant to me (as he modestly assumes), is more than redeemed by the specific precision of his artistic touch.

IRWIN SHAW

In his "Advice to a Young Writer," Mr. Shaw draws his examples from the life, labors, and luck of "Vladimir N., perched on a hill in Switzerland." To Irwin S., perched on a not-too-distant hill, I send by Alpine Horn my best greetings.

JAY NEUGEBOREN

In a very pretty little poem, Mr. Neugeboren seems to

rhyme, somewhat surprisingly, “Nabokov” and “love.” I would suggest “talk of” or “balk of” as more closely conforming to the stressed middle vowel of that awkward name (“Nabawkof”). I once composed the following rhyme for my students:

The querulous gawk of
A heron at night
Prompts Nabokov
To write

RICHARD GILMAN

Mr. Gilman’s tribute to *Ada* comes at a time when I still think that of all my books it is the one that corresponds most exactly to its fore-image; and therefore I cannot help being affected by his kind words.

GEORGE P. ELLIOTT

Among my short stories, “Signs and Symbols” still remains an old favorite of mine. I am happy that Mr. Elliott has singled it out for comment with a phrase from *Ada* heading his pithy piece.

ALFRED KAZIN

A final splendid salute comes from one of my friendliest readers. It ends on an emotional note which I inwardly

respond to without being able to formulate my response with Mr. Kazin's force and feeling.

Written on March 10, 1970, and published in the *Supplement to TriQuarterly* 17, Northwestern University Press, 1970.

8

ROWE'S SYMBOLS

"It appears," says Mr. Rowe* in his Introduction, "that Nabokov—partially by means of the mechanisms revealed below—will continue to flutter the pulses of his readers for some time."

"The mechanisms revealed below" is a pretty phrase, suggesting perhaps more than its author intends, but it does not quite apply to me. The purpose of the present review is not to answer a critic but to ask him to remove his belongings. The book consists of three parts. Whilst I have no great quarrel with the first two, entitled "A Touch of Russian" and "N. as Stage Manager," I must protest vehemently against a number of indecent absurdities contained in the third part, entitled "Sexual Manipulations."

One may wonder if it was worth Mr. Rowe's time to exhibit erotic bits picked out of *Lolita* and *Ada*—a process rather like looking for allusions to aquatic mammals in *Moby Dick*. But that is his own choice and concern. What I object to is Mr. Rowe's manipulating my most innocent words so as to introduce sexual "symbols" into them. The notion of symbol itself has always been abhorrent to me, and I never

* William Woodin Rowe: *Nabokov's Deceptive World*. New York University Press, 1971, 193 pp.

tire of retelling how I once failed a student—the dupe, alas, of an earlier teacher—for writing that Jane Austen describes leaves as “green” because Fanny is hopeful, and “green” is the color of hope. The symbolism racket in schools attracts computerized minds but destroys plain intelligence as well as poetical sense. It bleaches the soul. It numbs all capacity to enjoy the fun and enchantment of art. Who the hell cares, as Mr. Rowe wants us to care, that there is, according to his italics, a “man” in the sentence about a homosexual Swede who “had embarrassing *man-*ners” (p. 148), and another “man” in “*manipulate*” (*passim*)? “Wickedly folded moth” suggests “wick” to Mr. Rowe, and “wick,” as we Freudians know, is the Male Organ. “I” stands for “eye,” and “eye” stands for the Female Organ. Pencil licking is always a reference to you know what. A soccer goal hints at the vulval orifice (which Mr. Rowe evidently sees as square).

I wish to share with him the following secret: In the case of a certain type of writer it often happens that a whole paragraph or sinuous sentence exists as a discrete organism, with its own imagery, its own invocations, its own bloom, and then it is especially precious, and also vulnerable, so that if an outsider, immune to poetry and common sense, injects spurious symbols into it, or actually tampers with its wording (see Mr. Rowe’s crass attempt on his page 113), its magic is replaced by maggots. The various words that Mr. Rowe mistakes for the “symbols” of academic jargon, supposedly planted by an idiotically sly novelist to keep schoolmen busy, are not labels, not pointers, and certainly not the garbage cans of a Viennese tenement, but live fragments of specific description, rudiments of metaphor, and echoes of creative emotion. The fatal flaw in Mr. Rowe’s treatment of recurrent words, such as “garden” or “water,” is his regarding them as abstractions, and not realizing that the sound of a bath being filled, say, in the world of *Laughter in the Dark*, is as different from the limes

rustling in the rain of *Speak, Memory* as the Garden of Delights in *Ada* is from the lawns in *Lolita*. If every “come” and “part” on the pages of my books is supposedly used by me to represent “climax” and “genitals,” one can well imagine the naughty treasures Mr. Rowe might find in any French novel where the prefix “*con*” occurs so frequently as to make every chapter a veritable compote of female organs. I do not think, however, that his French is sufficient for such feasts; nor is his Russian good enough for his manipulations if he believes that “*otblesk*” (confused apparently with *otliv*) means “low tide” (page 111) or that the nonexistent “*triazh*” stands for “tyranny” (page 41) when actually the word that I used (and that he wrongly transcribed), *tirazh*, is merely a publisher’s term for “circulation.”

One can excuse a critic for not finding “stillicid” and “ganch” in his abridged dictionary and concluding that I invented those words; one can understand a dull reader of *Invitation to a Beheading* thinking that the executioner develops a homosexual tenderness for his victim when actually that affectionate look reflects only the lust of a chicken coveting a live chicken; but what I find unpardonable and indeed unworthy of a scholar, is Mr. Rowe’s twisting of my discussion of prosody (as appended to my translation of *Eugene Onegin*) into a torrent of Freudian drivel, which allows him to construe “metrical length” as an erection and “rhyme” as a sexual climax. No less ‘ludicrous’ is his examination of *Lolita*’s tennis and his claim that the tennis balls represent testicles (those of a giant albino, no doubt). Passing on to my reference to chess problems in *Speak, Memory* Mr. Rowe finds “sexual analogies” in such phrases as “mating devices” and “groping for a pawn in the box”—all of which is as much an insult to chess as to the problemist.

The jacket of Mr. Rowe’s book depicts a butterfly incongruously flying around a candle. Moths, not butterflies, are attracted to light but the designer’s blunder neatly

illustrates the quality of Mr. Rowe's preposterous and nasty interpretations. And he will be read, he will be quoted, he will be filed in great libraries, next to my arbors and mists!

Written at Gstaad, Bernese Oberland, on August 28, 1971, and published in *The New York Review* on October 7 of the same year.



9

INSPIRATION

(written on November 20, 1972, for Saturday Review)

The awakening, quickening, or creative impulse, esp. as manifested in high artistic achievement.

Webster, Second Ed., unabridged, 1957

The enthusiasm that sweeps away (*entraîne*) poets. Also a term of physiology (*insufflation*): “. . . wolves and dogs howl only by inspiration; one can easily ascertain this by causing a little dog to howl close to one’s face (Buffon).”

Littré, *éd. intégrale*, 1963

The enthusiasm, concentration, and unusual manifestation of the mental faculties (*umstvennyh sil*).

Dal, Revised Ed., St. Petersburg, 1904

A creative upsurge. [Examples:] Inspired poet. Inspired socialistic work.

Ozhegov, Russian dictionary, Moscow, 1960

A special study, which I do not plan to conduct, would reveal, probably, that inspiration is seldom dwelt upon nowadays even by the worst reviewers of our best prose. I say “our” and I say “prose” because I am thinking of American works of fiction, including my own stuff. It would seem that this reticence is somehow linked up with a sense of decorum. Conformists suspect that to speak of

“inspiration” is as tasteless and old-fashioned as to stand up for the Ivory Tower. Yet inspiration exists as do towers and tusks.

One can distinguish several types of inspiration, which intergrade, as all things do in this fluid and interesting world of ours, while yielding gracefully to a semblance of classification. A prefatory glow, not unlike some benign variety of the aura before an epileptic attack, is something the artist learns to perceive very early in life. This feeling of tickly well-being branches through him like the red and the blue in the picture of a skinned man under Circulation. As it spreads, it banishes all awareness of physical discomfort—youth’s toothache as well as the neuralgia of old age. The beauty of it is that, while completely intelligible (as if it were connected with a known gland or led to an expected climax), it has neither source nor object. It expands, glows, and subsides without revealing its secret. In the meantime, however, a window has opened, an auroral wind has blown, every exposed nerve has tingled. Presently all dissolves: the familiar worries are back and the eyebrow redescribes its arc of pain; but the artist knows he is ready.

A few days elapse. The next stage of inspiration is something ardently anticipated—and no longer anonymous. The shape of the new impact is indeed so definite that I am forced to relinquish metaphors and resort to specific terms. The narrator forefeels what he is going to tell. The forefeeling can be defined as an instant vision turning into rapid speech. If some instrument were to render this rare and delightful phenomenon, the image would come as a shimmer of exact details, and the verbal part as a tumble of merging words. The experienced writer immediately takes it down and, in the process of doing so, transforms what is little more than a running blur into gradually dawning sense, with epithets and sentence construction growing as clear and trim as they would be on the printed page:

Sea crashing, retreating with shuffle of pebbles, Juan and beloved young whore—is her name, as they say, Adora? is she Italian, Roumanian, Irish?—asleep in his lap, his opera cloak pulled over her, candle messily burning in its tin cup, next to it a paper-wrapped bunch of long roses, his silk hat on the stone floor near a patch of moonlight, all this in a corner of a decrepit, once palatial whorehouse, Villa Venus, on a rocky Mediterranean coast, a door standing ajar gives on what seems to be a moonlit gallery but is really a half-demolished reception room with a broken outer wall, through a great rip in it the naked sea is heard as a panting space separated from time, it dully booms, dully withdraws dragging its platter of wet pebbles.

This I jotted down one morning at the very end of 1965, a couple of months before the novel began to flow. What I give above is its first throb, the strange nucleus of the book that was to grow around it in the course of the next three years. Much of that growth obviously differs in coloration and lighting from the foreglimpsed scene, whose structural centrality, however, is emphasized, with a kind of pleasing neatness, by the fact that it now exists as an inset scene right in the middle of the novel (which was entitled at first *Villa Venus*, then *The Veens*, then *Ardor*, and finally *Ada*).

Reverting to a more generalized account, one sees inspiration accompanying the author in his actual work on the new book. She accompanies him (for by now we are in the presence of a nubile muse) by means of successive flashes to which the writer may grow so accustomed that a sudden fizzle in the domestic illumination may strike him as an act of betrayal.

One and the same person can compose parts of one and the same story or poem, either in his head or on paper, pencil or pen in hand (I am told there exist fantastic performers who actually *type out* their immediate product or, still more incredibly, *dictate* it, warm and bubbly, to a typist or to a machine!). Some prefer the bathtub to the study and the bed to the windy moor—the place does not

matter much, it is the relationship between the brain and the hand that poses some odd problems. As John Shade says somewhere: "I am puzzled by the difference between two methods of composing: *A*, the kind which goes on solely in the poet's mind, a testing of performing words, while he is soaping a third time one leg, and *B*, the other kind, much more decorous, when he's in his study writing with a pen. In method *B* the hand supports the thought, the abstract battle is concretely fought. The pen stops in mid-air, then swoops to bar a canceled sunset or restore a star, and thus it physically guides the phrase toward faint daylight through the inky maze. But method *A* is agony! The brain is soon enclosed in a steel cap of pain. A muse in overalls directs the drill which grinds, and which no effort of the will can interrupt, while the automaton is taking off what he has just put on or walking briskly to the corner store to buy the paper he has read before. Why is it so? Is it, perhaps, because in penless work there is no pen-poised pause . . . Or is the process deeper, with no desk to prop the muse and hoist the picturesque? For there are those mysterious moments when, too weary to delete, I drop my pen and ambulate—and by some mute command the right word flutes and perches on my hand."

That is, of course, where inspiration comes in. The words which on various occasions, during some fifty years of composing prose, I have put together and then canceled may have formed by now in the Realm of Rejection (a foggy but not quite unlikely land north of nowhere) a huge library of scrapped phrases, characterized and concorded only by their wanting the benison of inspiration.

No wonder, then, that a writer who is not afraid to confess that he has known inspiration and can readily distinguish it from the froth of a fit, as well as from the humdrum comfort of the "right word," should seek the bright trace of that thrill in the work of fellow authors. The bolt of inspiration strikes invariably: you observe the

flash in this or that piece of great writing, be it a stretch of fine verse, or a passage in Joyce or Tolstoy, or a phrase in a short story, or a spurt of genius in the paper of a naturalist, of a scholar, or even in a book reviewer's article. I have in view, naturally, not the hopeless hacks we all know—but people who are creative artists in their own right, such as, say, Trilling (with his critical opinions I am not concerned), or Thurber (*e.g.* in *Voices of Revolution*: “Art does not rush to the barricades”).

In recent years numerous publishers have had the pleasure of sending me their anthologies—homing pigeons really, for all of them contain samples of the recipient's writings. Amongst the thirty or so of those collections, some flaunt pretentious labels (“Fables of Our Time” or “Themes and Targets”); others are presented more soberly (“Great Tales”) and their blurbs promise the reader that he will meet cranberry pickers and hunkies; but almost in each of them there are at least two or three first-rate stories.

Age is chary, but it is also forgetful, and in order to choose instantly what to reread on a night of Orphic thirst and what to reject for ever, I am careful to put an A, or a C, or a D-minus, against this or that item in the anthology. The profusion of high marks reconfirms me every time in the exhilarating belief that at the present time (say, for the last fifty years) the greatest short stories have been produced not in England, not in Russia, and certainly not in France, but in this country.

Examples are the stained-glass windows of knowledge. From a small number of A-plus stories I have chosen half-a-dozen particular favorites of mine. I list their titles below and parenthesize briefly the passage—or one of the passages—in which genuine afflation appears to be present, no matter how trivial the inspired detail may look to a dull criticule.

John Cheever's “The Country Husband” (“Jupiter [a black retriever] crashed through the tomato vines with the

remains of a felt hat in his mouth." The story is really a miniature novel beautifully traced, so that the impression of there being a little too many things happening in it is completely redeemed by the satisfying coherence of its thematic interlacings.)

John Updike's "The Happiest I've Been" ("The important thing, rather than the subject, was the conversation itself, the quick agreements, the slow nods, the weave of different memories; it was like one of these Panama baskets shaped underwater around a worthless stone." I like so many of Updike's stories that it was difficult to choose one for demonstration and even more difficult to settle upon its most inspired bit.)

J. D. Salinger's "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" ("Stopping only to sink a foot in a soggy, collapsed castle . . ." This is a great story, too famous and fragile to be measured here by a casual conchometrist.)

Herbert Gold's "Death in Miami Beach" ("Finally we die, opposable thumbs and all." Or to do even better justice to this admirable piece: "Barbados turtles as large as children . . . crucified like thieves . . . the tough leather of their skin does not disguise their present helplessness and pain.")

John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" ("What is the story's point? Ambrose is ill. He perspires in the dark passages; candied apples-on-a-stick, delicious-looking, disappointing to eat. Funhouses need men's and ladies' rooms at interval." I had some trouble in pinning down what I needed amidst the lovely swift speckled imagery.)

Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (" . . . and the fatal merciless passionate ocean." Although there are several other divine vibrations in this story that so miraculously blends an old cinema film with a personal past, the quoted phrase wins its citation for power and impeccable rhythm.)

I must add that I would be very pleased if a Professor of

Literature to test his students at the start or the close of the term would request them to write a paper discussing the following points:

1. What is so good about those six stories? (Refrain from referring to "commitment," "ecology," "realism," "symbols," and so forth).

2. What other passages in them bear the mark of inspiration?

3. How exactly was that poor lap dog made to howl in those lace-cuffed hands, close to that periwig?

LEPIDOPTERA PAPERS

For nearly fifteen years after moving, in 1940, to America I devoted a tremendous amount of time (more in fact than I did to writing and teaching) to the study of lepidoptera, a study consisting of three parts: working out certain microscopic structures in the laboratory of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard; contributing scientific papers to entomological journals; and collecting during summer vacations. At least three of those papers have sufficient literary interest to deserve a place in this volume and to them I have added two book reviews, the last one published quite recently.

10

THE FEMALE OF *LYCAEIDES* *SUBLIVENS* NAB.*

Last summer (1951) I decided to visit Telluride, San Miguel County, Colorado, in order to search for the unknown female of what I had described as *Lycaeides argyrognomon sublivens* in 1949 (*Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.*, vol. 101: p. 513) on the strength of nine males in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard, which had been taken in the vicinity of Telluride half a century ago. *L. sublivens* is an isolated southern representative (the only known one south of northwestern Wyoming, southeast of Idaho, and east of California) of the species (the holarctic *argyrognomon* Bergstr.=*idas auct.*) to which *anna* Edw., *scudderi* Edw., *aster* Edw., and six other nearctic subspecies belong. I bungled my family's vacation but got what I wanted.

Owing to rains and floods, especially noticeable in Kansas, most of the drive from New York State to Colorado was entomologically uneventful. When reached at last, Telluride turned out to be a damp, unfrequented, but very spectacular cul-de-sac (which a prodigious rainbow strad-

* Now known as *Plebejus (Lycaeides) idas sublivens* or *Lycaeides sublivens* Nab.; it has been dubbed "Nabokov's Blue" by F. Martin Brown (1955).

dled every evening) at the end of two converging roads, one from Placerville, the other from Dolores, both atrocious. There is one motel, the optimistic and excellent Valley View Court where my wife and I stayed, at 9,000 feet altitude, from the 3rd to the 29th of July, walking up daily to at least 12,000 feet along various more or less steep trails in search of *sublivens*. Once or twice Mr. Homer Reid of Telluride took us up in his jeep. Every morning the sky would be of an impeccable blue at 6 A.M. when I set out. The first innocent cloudlet would scud across at 7:30 A.M. Bigger fellows with darker bellies would start tampering with the sun around 9 A.M., just as we emerged from the shadow of the cliffs and trees onto good hunting grounds. Everything would be cold and gloomy half an hour later. At around 10 A.M. there would come the daily electric storm, in several installments, accompanied by the most irritatingly close lightning I have ever encountered anywhere in the Rockies, not excepting Longs Peak, which is saying a good deal, and followed by cloudy and rainy weather through the rest of the day.

After 10 days of this, and despite diligent subsequent exploration, only one sparse colony of *sublivens* was found. On that one spot my wife found a freshly emerged male on the 15th. Three days later I had the pleasure of discovering the unusual-looking female. Between the 15th and the 28th, a dozen hours of windy but passable collecting weather in all (not counting the hours and hours uselessly spent in mist and rain) yielded only 54 specimens, of which 16 were females. Had I been younger and weighed less, I might have perhaps got another 50, but hardly much more than that, and, possibly, the higher ridges I vainly investigated between 12,000 and 14,000 feet at the end of July, in the *magdalena-snowi-centaureae* zone, might have produced *sublivens* later in the season.

The colony I found was restricted to one very steep slope reaching from about 10,500 to a ridge at 11,000 feet and

towering over Tomboy Road between "Social Tunnel" and "Bullion Mine." The slope was densely covered with a fine growth of lupines in flower (*Lupinus parviflorus* Nuttall, which did not occur elsewhere along the trail) and green gentians (the tall turrets of which were assiduously patronized by the Broad-Tailed Hummingbird and the White-Striped Hawkmoth). This lupine, which in the mountains of Utah is the food-plant of an alpine race of *L. melissa* (*annetta* Edw.), proved to be also the host of *L. sublivens*. The larva pupates at its base, and in dull weather a few specimens of both sexes of the imago could be found settled on the lower leaves and stems, the livid tone of the butterflies' undersides nicely matching the tint of the plant.

The female of *sublivens* is of a curiously arctic appearance, completely different from the richly pigmented, regionally sympatric, locoweed- and alfalfa-feeding *L. melissa* or from the *melissa*-like females of Wyoming and Idaho *argyrognomon* (*idas*) races, and somewhat resembling *argyrognomon* (*idas*) forms from northwestern Canada and Alaska (see for instance in the above-mentioned work, p. 501 and plate 8, fig. 112). It also recalls a certain combination of characters that crops up in *L. melissa annetta*.

Here is a brief description of *L. sublivens* female: Upper-side of a rather peculiar, smooth, weak brown, with an olivaceous cast in the living insect; more or less extensively dusted with cinder-blue scales; triangulate greyish blue inner cretules generally present in the hindwing and often accompanied by some bluish or greyish bleaching in the radial cells of the forewing; aurorae reduced: short and dullish in the hindwing, blurred or absent in the forewing, tending to disappear in both wings and almost completely absent in 3 specimens; lunulate pale greyish blue outer cretules very distinct in both wings; underside similar to that of the male.

Deposited: 20 males and 10 females in the Cornell

University collection, and 18 males and 6 females in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

Published in *The Lepidopterists' News*,
New Haven, Conn., Vol. 6, August 8, 1952, pp. 35–36.

11

ON SOME INACCURACIES IN KLOTS' *FIELD GUIDE*

In connection with "Blues," I wish to correct two or three slips in Professor Alexander B. Klots' important and delightful book (*A Field Guide to the Butterflies of North America, East of the Great Plains*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1951).

On p. 166 there is a misprint: "Center (formerly Karner)" should be, of course, "Karner (formerly Center)." Incidentally I visit the place every time I happen to drive (as I do yearly in early June) from Ithaca to Boston and can report that, despite local picnickers and the hideous garbage they leave, the lupines and *Lycaeides samuelis* Nab. are still doing as fine under those old gnarled pines along the railroad as they did ninety years ago.

On p. 165, another, more unfortunate transposition occurs: "When fawn colored, more vivid in tone" should refer not to *Lycaeides argyrognomon* [idas] but to *L. melissa*, while "wings beneath, when fawn colored, duller in tone" should refer not to *L. melissa* but to *L. argyrognomon* [idas] (see my "Nearctic *Lycaeides*," *Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool.*, vol. 101: p. 541: 1949).

On pp. 162–164, the genus *Brephidium* (in company with two others) is incorrectly placed between *Hemiargus* and

Lycaeides. I have shown in my paper on Neotropical Plebejinae (*Psyche*, vol. 52: pp. 1–61; 1945) that *Hemiargus* (*sensu lato*) and *Lycaeides* belong to the same group (subfamily Plebejinae—or supergenus *Plebejus*; the rank does not matter but the relationship does). *Brephidium*, of course, stands on the very outskirts of the family, in a highly specialized group, immeasurably further removed from *Hemiargus* or *Lycaeides* than, say, *Lycaena*. This is where my subfamilies come in handy since at least they keep related things in one bunch and eject intruders. Views may differ in regard to the hierarchic element in the classification I adopt, but no one has questioned so far the fact of the structural relationship and phylogenetic circumstances I mean it to reflect. The whole interest of *Hemiargus* is that it is allied to *Lycaeides* etc., while bearing a striking superficial resemblance to an African group with which it does not have the slightest structural affinity. Systematics, I think, should bring out such points and not keep them blurred in the haze of tradition. I am perfectly willing to demote the whole of my “subfamily” Plebejinae to a supergenus or genus *Plebejus* (*Plebejus ceraunus, isola, thomasi, idas, melissa, aquilo, saepiolus*, etc.) but only under the condition that it include exactly the same species, in the same groupings (“subgenera” or numbered sections, as you will) and in the same sequence of groups, without intrusions from groups assigned structurally to other “subfamilies” (and then, of course, *lygdamus, battoides*, and *piasus* should be all in *Scolitantides* or its equivalent). However, I still think that the formality of generic names for the groupings is a better method than going by numbers, etc. Names are also easier to handle in works on zoological distribution when it is important to bring out the way a group is represented in different regions of the world. Generally speaking, systematics is not directly concerned with the convenience of collectors in their dealings with small local faunas. It should attempt to express structural affinities and divergences, suggest certain

phylogenetic lines, relate local developments to global ones—and help lumpers to sort out properly the ingredients of their lumps.

The Lepidopterists' News, Vol. 6, August 8, 1952, p. 41

12

BUTTERFLY COLLECTING IN WYOMING, 1952

A visit to Wyoming by car in July–August 1952 was devoted to collecting in the following places:

Southeastern Wyoming: eastern Medicine Bow National Forest, in the Snowy Range, up to approximately 10,500 ft. alt. (using paved road 130 between Laramie and Saratoga); sagebrush country, approximately 7,000 ft. alt., between Saratoga and Encampment, east of paved highway 230; marshes at about the same elevation between eastern Medicine Bow National Forest and Northgate, northern Colorado, within 15 miles from the Wyoming State Line, mainly south of the unpaved road 127; and W. Medicine Bow National Forest, in the Sierra Madre, using the abominable local road from Encampment to the Continental Divide (approximately 9,500 ft. alt.).

Western Wyoming: sagebrush, approximately 6,500 ft. alt. immediately east of Dubois along the (well-named) Wind River; western Shoshone and Teton National Forests, following admirable paved road 26, from Dubois towards Moran over Togwotee Pass (9,500 ft. alt.); near Moran, on Buffalo River, approximately 7,000 ft. alt.; traveling through the construction hell of the city of Jackson, and bearing southeast along paved 187 to The Rim

(7,900 ft. alt.); and, finally, spending most of August in collecting around the altogether enchanting little town of Afton (on paved 89, along the Idaho border), approximately 7,000 ft. alt., mainly in canyons east of the town, and in various spots of Bridger National Forest, Southwestern part, along trails up to 9,000 ft. alt.

Most of the material collected has gone to the Cornell University Museum; the rest to the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Comparative Zoology.

The best hunting grounds proved to be: the Sierra Madre at about 8,000 ft. alt., where on some forest trails I found among other things a curious form (? *S. secreta* dos Passos & Grey) of *Speyeria egleis* Behr flying in numbers with *S. atlantis hesperis* Edw. and *S. hydaspe purpurascens* H. Edw., a very eastern locality for the latter; still better were the forests, meadows, and marshes about Togwotee Pass in the third week of July, where the generally early emergences of the season were exemplified by great quantities of *Erebia theona ethela* Edw. and *E. callias callias* Edw. already on the wing; very good, too, were some of the canyons near Afton.

Here are a few notes on what interested me most in the field: *Boloria*, *Colias*, certain Blues, and migratory or at least "mobile" species.

Of *Boloria* I got seven species, of the eight (or possibly ten) that occur within the region. Plunging into the forest south of route 130 on the western slopes of the Snowy Range, I found *B. selene tollandensis* B & McD. not uncommon on a small richly flowered marsh at about 8,000 ft. alt.; also on marshes north of Northgate and on Togwotee Pass. On July 8, I spent three hours collecting a dozen fresh specimens of *B. eunomia alticola* B & McD., both sexes, on a tiny very wet marsh along the eastern lip of the last lake before reaching Snowy Range Pass from the west, possibly the same spot where Klots had taken it in 1935 (*Journ. N. Y. Ent. Soc.* 45: p. 326; 1937). I met with the same form on a marsh near Peacock Lake, Longs Peak, Colorado, in

1947. Forms of *B. titania* Esp. (mostly near ssp. *helena* Edw.) were abundant everywhere above 7,500 ft. alt. By the end of July *B. freija* Thunb. was in tatters near Togwotee Pass (it had been on the wane in June, 1947, on marshes near Columbine Lodge, Estes Park; and on Hoback River, Tetons, in early July, 1949). Of the beautiful *B. frigga sagata* B. & Benj. I took two ♂♂ (fresh but frayed) near Togwotee Pass. Of *B. toddi* Holland ssp. I took a very fresh ♂ in early July in the Snowy Range at 8,000 ft. alt. and a couple of days later, acting upon a hunch, I visited a remarkably repulsive-looking willow-bog, full of cowmerds and barbed wire, off route 127, and found there a largish form of *B. toddi* very abundant—in fact, I have never seen it as common anywhere in the west; unfortunately, the specimens, of which I kept a score or so, were mostly faded—and very difficult to capture, their idea of sport being to sail to and fro over the fairly tall sallows that encompassed the many small circular areas (inhabited only by *Plebeius saepiolus* Boisd. and *Polites utahensis* Skin.) into which the bog was divided by the shrubs. Another species I had never seen to be so common was *B. kriemhild* Strecker which I found in all the willow-bogs near Togwotee Pass.

In regard to *Colias* I could not discover what I wanted—which was some geographical intergradation between *C. scudderi* Reakirt, which I suggest should be classified as *C. palaeno scudderi* (Reakirt) (common everywhere in the Medicine Bow National Forest), and *C. pelidne skinneri* Barnes (locally common near Togwotee Pass and above Afton). I was struck, however, by the identical ovipositing manners of *C. scudderi* and *C. skinneri* ♀♀ which were common in the densest woods of their respective habitats, laying on *Vaccinium*. I found *C. meadi* Edw. very common on Snowy Range Pass. It was also present at timberline near Togwotee Pass and east of it, below timberline, down to 8,000 ft. alt. in willow-bogs, where it was accompanied by another usually “Hudsonian” species, *Lycaena snowi* Edw.,

the latter represented by undersized individuals. (In early July, 1951, near Telluride, Colorado, I found a colony of healthy *Colias meadi* and one of very sluggish *Pargus centaureae freija* Warren in aspen groves along a canyon at only 8,500 ft. alt.) On a slope near Togwotee Pass at timberline I had the pleasure of discovering a strain of *C. meadi* with albinic ♀♀. The species was anything but common there, but of the dozen ♀♀ or so seen or caught, as many as three were albinic. Of these my wife and I took two, hers a dull white similar to *C. hecla* "pallida," mine slightly tinged with peach (the only other time I saw a white *C. meadi* was at the base of Longs Peak, 1947, where the species was extremely abundant).

In 1949 and 1951, when collecting *Lycaeides* in the Tetons, all over Jackson Hole, and in the Yellowstone, I had found that to the north and east *L. argyrognomon (idas) longinus* Nab. turns into *L. argyrognomon (idas) scudderi* Edw. but I had not solved the problem of the *L. melissa* strain so prominent in some colonies of *L. argyrognomon longinus* (i.e. Black Tail Butte near Jackson). I had conjectured that hybridization occurs or had occurred with wandering low elevation *L. melissa* (the rather richly marked "Artemisian" *L. melissa*—probably in need of some name) that follows alfalfa along roads as *Plebeius saepiolus* does clover. In result of my 1952 quest the situation appears as follows. The most northern point where typical *L. longinus* occurs is the vicinity of Moran, seldom below 7,000 ft. alt. and up to 11,000 at least. It spreads south at those altitudes for more than a thousand miles to the southern tip of Bridger National Forest but not much further (I have not found it, for instance, around Kemmerer). I have managed to find one *L. melissa*, a fresh ♂, in August, 1952, in a dry field near Afton, less than a mile from the canyon into which both sexes of *L. longinus* descended from the woods above. At eastern points of the Bridger and Shoshone Forests, *L. longinus* stops definitely at The Rim, west of Bondurant,

and at Brooks Lake (about 7,500 ft. alt.) some twenty miles west of Dubois. Very small colonies (seldom more than half-a-dozen specimens were taken in any one place) of *L. melissa* were found around Dubois at 6,500 ft. alt. or so (agricultural areas and the hot dry hills). A colony of typical (alpine) *L. melissa melissa* as described by Edwards, was found just above timberline in the Sierra Madre. The search for *L. melissa* in various windy and barren localities in the sagebrush zone in mid-July led to the finding of a rather unexpected Blue. This was *Plebeius (Icaricia) shasta* Edw., common in the parched plain at less than 7,000 ft. alt. between Saratoga and Encampment flying on sandy ground with *Phyciodes mylitta barnesi* Skinner, *Satyrium fuliginosa* Edw., and *Neominois ridingsi* Edw. It was also abundant all over the hot hills at 6,500 ft. alt. around Dubois where nothing much else occurred. I have not yet been able to compare my specimens with certain series in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard, but I suggest that this low-altitude *P. shasta* is the true *P. minnehaha* Scudder while the alpine form which I found in enormous numbers above timberline in Estes Park (especially, on Twin Sisters) and which collectors, following Holland's mislead, call "*minnehaha*," is really an undescribed race.

As to migratory species observed in Wyoming, 1952, I distinguish two groups: (1) latitudinal migrants—moving within their zones of habitat mainly in a west-east (North America) or east-west (Europe) direction and capable of surviving a Canadian Zone winter in this or that stage. Mobile, individually wandering species of *Plebeius* and *Colias* belong to this group as well as our four erratically swarming *Nymphalis* species which hibernate in the imaginal stage. In early August the trails in Bridger National Forest were covered at every damp spot with millions of *N. californica* Boisd. in tippling groups of four hundred and more, and countless individuals were drifting in a steady

stream along every canyon. It was interesting to find a few specimens of the beautiful dark western form of *N. j-album* Boisd. & Lec. among the *N. californica* near Afton. (2) longitudinal migrants—moving early in the season from subtropical homes to summer breeding places in the Nearctic region but not hibernating there in any stage. *Vanessa cardui* L. is a typical example. Its movements in the New World are considerably less known than in the Old World (in eastern Europe, for instance, according to my own observations, migratory flights from beyond the Black Sea hit the south of the Crimea in April, and females, bleached and tattered, reach the Leningrad region early in June). In the first week of July, 1952, this species (offspring mainly) was observed in colossal numbers above timberline in the Snowy Range over which the first spring flock had passed on May 28, according to an intelligent ranger. A few specimens of *Euptoieta claudia* Cramer were in clover fields around Afton, western Wyoming, in August. Of *Leptotes marina* Reakirt, one ♂ was observed near Afton in August, with *Apodemia mormo* Felder and “*Hemiargus*” (*Echinargus*) *isola* Reakirt. Both *A. mormo* and *E. isola* plant very isolated small summer colonies on hot hillsides. The *H. isola* specimens, which I took also in Medicine Bow National Forest, are all tiny ones, an obvious result of seasonal environment, not subspeciation. *H. isola* (incidentally, this is not a Latin adjective, but a fancy name—an Italian noun originally—and cannot be turned into “*isolus*” to comply with the gender of the generic name, as done by some writers) belongs to a neotropical group (my *Echinargus*) with two other species: *E. martha* Dognin, from the Andes, and a new species, described by me but not named, from Trinidad and Venezuela (see *Psyche*, 52: 3–4). Other representatives of neotropical groups (*Graphium marcellus* Cramer, “*Strymon*” *melinus* Hübner, *Pyrgus communis* Grote, *Epargyreus clarus* Cramer—to name the most obvious ones) have established themselves in the Nearctic more securely than

H. isola. Among the migratory Pierids, the following were observed: single specimens of *Nathalis iole* Boisd. all over Wyoming; one worn ♂ of *Phoebis eubule* L. in the Sierra Madre (Battle Lake), July 9; one worn ♂ of *Eurema mexicana* Boisd., between Cheyenne and Laramie (and a worn ♀ near Ogallala, Neb.), first week of July.

The Lepidopterists' News,
Vol. 7, July 26, 1953, pp. 49–52.

13

AUDUBON'S BUTTERFLIES, MOTHS AND OTHER STUDIES

Compiled and edited by Alice Ford

Anyone knowing as little about butterflies as I do about birds may find Audubon's lepidoptera as attractive as his bright, active, theatrical birds are to me. Whatever those birds do, I am with them, heartily sharing, for instance, the openbilled wonder of "Green Heron" at the fantastic situation and much too bright colors of "Luna Moth" in a famous picture of the "Birds" folio. At present, however, I am concerned only with Audubon's sketchbook ("a fifteen-page pioneer art rarity" belonging to Mrs. Kirby Chambers of New Castle, Kentucky) from which Miss Ford has published drawings of butterflies and other insects in a handsome volume padded with additional pictorial odds and ends and an account of Audubon's life. The sketches were made in the 1820s. Most of the lepidoptera which they burlesque came from Europe (Southern France, I suggest). Their scientific names, supplied by Mr. Austin H. Clark, are meticulously correct—except in the case of one butterfly, p. 20, top, which is not a *Hamaeris* but a distorted *Zerynthia*. Their English equivalents, however, reveal some sad editorial blundering: "Cabbage," p. 23, and "Miller," p.

91, should be "Bath White" and "Witch," respectively; and the two moths on p. 64 are emphatically not "Flesh Flies." In an utterly helpless account of the history of entomological illustration, Miss Ford calls Audubon's era "scientifically unsophisticated." The unsophistication is all her own. She might have looked up John Abbot's prodigious representations of North American lepidoptera, 1797, or the splendid plates of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century German lepidopterists, or the rich butterflies that enliven the flowers and fruit of the old Dutch Masters. She might have traveled back some thirty-three centuries to the times of Tuthmosis IV or Amenophis III and, instead of the obvious scarab, found there frescoes with a marvelous Egyptian butterfly (subtly combining the pattern of our Painted Lady and the body of an African ally of the Monarch). I cannot speak with any authority about the beetles and grasshoppers in the Sketchbook, but the butterflies are certainly inept. The exaggerated crenulation of hindwing edges, due to a naive artist's doing his best to render the dry, rumpled margins of carelessly spread specimens, is typical of the poorest entomological figures of earlier centuries and to these figures Audubon's sketches are curiously close. Query: Can anyone draw something he knows nothing about? Does there not exist a high ridge where the mountainside of "scientific" knowledge joins the opposite slope of "artistic" imagination? If so, Audubon, the butterfly artist, is at sea level on one side and climbing the wrong foothill on the other.

The New York Times Book Review,
December 28, 1952.

14

L. C. HIGGINS AND N. D. RILEY

Field Guide to the Butterflies of Britain and Europe

In my early boyhood, almost sixty-five years ago, I would quiver with helpless rage when Hofmann in his then famous *Die Gross-Schmetterlinge Europas* failed to figure the rarity he described in the text. No such frustration awaits the young reader of the marvelous guide to the Palaearctic butterflies west of the Russian frontier now produced by Lionel C. Higgins, author of important papers on Lepidoptera, and Norman D. Riley, keeper of insects at the British Museum. The exclusion of Russia is (alas) a practical necessity. Non-utilitarian science does not thrive in that sad and cagey country; the mild foreign gentleman eager to collect in the steppes will soon catch his net in a tangle of barbed wire, and to work out the distribution of Eversmann's Orange Tip or the Edda Ringlet would have proved much harder than mapping the moon. The little maps that the Field Guide does supply for the fauna it covers seem seldom to err. I note that the range of the Twin-spot Fritillary and that of the Idas Blue are incorrectly marked, and I think Nogell's Hairstreak, which reaches Romania from the east, should have been included. Among minor

shortcomings is the somewhat curt way in which British butterflies are treated (surely the Norfolk race of the Swallowtail, which is so different from the Swedish, should have received more attention). I would say that alder, rather than spruce, characterizes the habitat of Wolfensberger's and Thor's Fritillaries. I regret that the dreadful nickname "Admiral" is used instead of the old "Admirable." The new vernacular names are well invented—and, paradoxically, will be more attractive to the expert wishing to avoid taxonomic controversy when indicating a species than to the youngster who will lap up the Latin in a trice. The checklist of species would have been considerably more appealing if the names of authors had not been omitted (a deplorable practice of commercial origin which impairs a number of recent zoological and botanical manuals in America).

The choice of important subspecies among the thousands described in the last hundred years is a somewhat subjective matter and cannot be discussed here. In deciding whether to regard a butterfly as a race of its closest ally or as a separate species the *Field Guide* displays good judgment in re-attaching Rebel's Blue to Alcon, and in tying up the Bryony White with the Green-veined White: anyone who has walked along a mountain brook in the Valais, the Tessin, and elsewhere must have noticed the profusion and almost comic muddle of varicolored intergrades between those two Whites. In a few cases, however, the authors seem to have succumbed to the blandishments of the chromosome count. For better or worse our present notion of species in Lepidoptera is based solely on the checkable structures of dead specimens, and if Forster's Furry cannot be distinguished from the Furry Blue except by its chromosome number, Forster's Furry must be scrapped.

In many groups the *Field Guide* accepts the generic splitting proposed by various specialists. The resulting orgy of genera may bewilder the innocent reader and

irritate the conservative old lumper. A compromise might be reached by demoting the genitally allied genera to the rank of subgenera within one large genus. Thus, for instance, a large generic group, called, say, *Scolitantides*, would include 6 subgenera (pp. 262–271 of the *Field Guide*, from Green-underside Blue to Chequered Blue) and a large generic group, called, say, *Plebejus*, would include 15 subgenera (pp. 271–311, Grass Jewel to Eros Blue); what matters, of course, is not naming or numbering the groups but correctly assorting the species so as to reflect relationships and distinctions, and in that sense the *Field Guide* is logical and scientific. On the other hand, I must disagree with the misapplication of the term “f.” (meaning “form”). It is properly used to denote recurrent aberrations, clinal blends, or seasonal aspects, but it has no taxonomic standing (and available names for such forms should be quote-marked and anonymous). This the authors know as well as I do, yet for some reason they use “f.” here and there as a catchall for altitudinal races and minor subspecies. Particularly odd is “*Boloria graeca balcanica* f. *tendensis*,” which is actually *Boloria graeca tendensis* Higgins, a lovely and unexpected subspecies for the sake of which I once visited Limone Piemonte where I found it at about 7000 ft. in the company of its two congeners, the Shepherd’s and the Mountain Fritillaries. Incidentally, the drabbish figure hardly does justice to the nacreous pallor of its underside.

These are all trivial flaws which melt away in the book’s aura of authority and honesty, conciseness and completeness, but there is one fault which I find serious and which should be corrected in later printings. The explanation facing every plate should give the exact place and date of capture of every painted or photographed specimen—a principle to which the latest butterfly books rigidly adhere. This our *Field Guide* omits to do. In result the young reader will not only be deprived of a vicarious thrill but will not know if the specimen came from anywhere near the type

locality, whilst the old lepidopterist may at once perceive that the portrait does not represent an individual of the typical race. Thus one doubts that the bright female of the Northern Wall Brown (Pl. 49) comes from the North, and it is a pity that the Poplar Admirable shown on Pl. 15 should belong to the brownish, blurrily banded West European sub-species rather than to the black Scandinavian type race with pure white markings.

The red-stained Corsican Swallowtail (front end-paper) is surely a printer's freak, not the artist's fancy, and no doubt will be repaired in due time. Many of Brian Hargreaves' illustrations are excellent, some are a little crude, a few are poor; all his butterflies, however, are recognizable, which after all is the essential purpose. His treatment of wing shape is sometimes wobbly, for instance in the case of the Heaths (Pl. 47), and one notes a displeasing tendency to acuminate the hind-wing margins of some Ringlets (Plates 37, 41, 44). In some groups of closely allied butterflies Nature seems to have taken capricious delight in varying from species to species the design of the hind-wing underside, thinking up fantastic twists and tints, but never sacrificing the basic generic idea to the cunning disguise. Brian Hargreaves has not always followed this interplay of thematic variations within the genus. For example, in the *Clossiana* hind-wing undersides the compact jagged rhythm of the Polar Fritillary's markings, which intensifies and unifies the Freya scheme, is weakly rendered. The artist has not understood the affinity with Frigga that dimly transpires through the design of the Dusky-winged, nor has he seen the garlands of pattern and the violet tones as connecting the Arctic Fritillary with Titania, and the latter with Dia. Otherwise, many such rarely figured butterflies as the Atlas White, the Fatma Blue, and Chapman's Hairstreak, or such tricky creatures as the enchanting Blues on Pl. 57 came out remarkably well. The feat of assembling all those Spanish and African beauties in one book is not the

least glory of Higgins' and Riley's unique and indispensable manual.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vladimir Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg on April 23, 1899. His family fled to Germany in 1919, during the Bolshevik Revolution. Nabokov studied French and Russian literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1919 to 1923, then lived in Berlin (1923–1937) and Paris (1937–1940) where he began writing, mainly in Russian, under the pseudonym Sirin. In 1940 he moved to the United States, where he pursued a brilliant literary career (as a poet, novelist, critic, and translator) while teaching literature at Wellesley College, Stanford, Cornell, and Harvard. The monumental success of his novel *Lolita* (1955) enabled him to give up teaching and devote himself fully to his writing. In 1961 he moved to Montreux, Switzerland, where he died in 1977. Recognized as one of this century's master prose stylists in both Russian and English, he translated a number of his original English works—including *Lolita*—into Russian, and collaborated on English translations of his original Russian works.



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